

STEEL CITY HEROES BOOK 1

CATALYST

The book cover features a man and a woman in the foreground. The man, standing behind the woman, has glowing orange and red energy coursing through his arms. The woman is holding a glowing blue sphere with intricate geometric patterns. The background is a dark blue sky with bright blue lightning bolts and a city skyline with a prominent skyscraper. The overall color palette is dominated by blue and orange.

C M RAYMOND
L E BARBANT

CATALYST

By LE Barbant and CM Raymond

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Table of Contents

Copyright Page

DEDICATION

CONNECT

PROLOGUE

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CHAPTER THIRTY

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

PART TWO

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

CHAPTER FORTY

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

CHAPTER FIFTY

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

PART THREE

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

CHAPTER SIXTY

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

CHAPTER SEVENTY

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

EPILOGUE

DEDICATION

CHRIS AND LEE WOULD like to thank their families for letting them go on this strange adventure.

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Homestead, Pennsylvania 1902



GOD FORMED MAN OUT of the dust and breathed the breath of life in him.

Man pulled steel from the earth and turned himself into a god.

“This is my city, Gabrijel. You’re forcing my hand.” The man’s bleached white shirt peeked out from under his wool overcoat. His bowtie seemed comically out of place. “You have left me no other choice.”

He didn’t belong here.

But for Gabrijel, the dirty mill floor was more than familiar—it was home. He had crossed the exact spot more times than he could count. His feet knew the floors, his hands the machines. His soul was knit into this place.

He loved the steel mill in ways the well-dressed man could never understand. Gabrijel believed in the industry, believed in the work done there. It drove him to this fight. And, one way or another, fights always came to an end.

A half dozen goons surrounded him. They were the management’s muscle, and Gabrijel had become the brains of labor. In the abstract, they were enemies; though, in practice, this wasn’t quite true. Good guys, each one of them. Family men, when off the clock. Funny. They were usually reliable for a bummed smoke after a long shift.

But things had changed.

Just like Gabrijel, they had a job. And, good guys or not, they had come here to do it.

“It’s far past time your hand was forced,” Gabrijel spat back through a thick accent. “You don’t know what it’s like for us, for your workers. The conditions are terrible, the pay a crime. You’ve pushed us too far, and we had to stand up. For our rights, for our families, and for this city.”

The man laughed. “Do you really think you know what’s good for Pittsburgh? This isn’t your home, it’s mine. You’re nothing but strangers here. And I own you. It’s time you made peace with that.”

Holding his chin high, Gabrijel tightened his jaw and stared down the men. This wasn’t going to end well, and he knew it. The labor war would be long, his stand only one of many still to come. The Croatian millworker’s legs shook, but he had been beaten plenty of times before. He could take it.

“Then let’s get this over with. Make an example of me. We’ll only come back stronger.”

The man sneered. “You have no idea, Gabrijel. This latest protest of yours might cost us everything. If they do not stop, the workers’ demands will destroy steel—ruin this city. I need to end it once and for all. For the city. The hottest fires forge the coldest steel.”

The man turned to leave, then, hesitating, he walked over to his prisoner. Smiling, he grabbed the medallion hanging around Gabrijel’s neck and ripped it off. “Something to remember you by.”

The boss nodded to a stout, bald man with a crooked nose and wide-set eyes. That hardened face was the only mug that Gabrijel did not recognize. Without hesitation, the ox took out Gabrijel’s legs with a steel bar. Bits of rock ground into his knees as he hit the floor. His arms pulled against the rope that fastened him to chains overhead. Its cords bit into his wrists.

Gabrijel tried not to scream but bracing himself remained useless. Defensive postures never lessened the pain. All he had left was his pride, and he held it with a firm grasp. He looked up into the eyes of the bald man. They were devoid of emotion.

Blank.

Inhuman.

The thug kicked Gabrijel, knocking him to his side. The rest of the men retreated.

Boli me kurac? he thought. *Is this all they had for me?*

Only then did he realize where he lay: directly under a crucible. The giant metal pot glowed orange like the high-noon sun. He tried to move, to roll out of the way, but with his damaged knees and restrained arms, his efforts proved futile.

The bald man stepped toward the lever, pausing long enough to give Gabrijel a jackal’s smile.

His destiny became clear. The sacrifice took shape. He was a lamb, and this was the slaughter. He thought about Adrijana. He thought about his men and the fate that would soon befall them. He thought about Pittsburgh.

Rage filled his heart.

“Rana te ljuta zapala.”

The old curse of his motherland was swallowed up by the screaming.

The molten steel covering his body began to cool before his cries ceased ringing through the mill.



Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Current Day

A BAR OF STEEL—IT IS only Smoke at the heart of it, smoke and the blood of a man.

*A runner of fire ran in it, ran out, ran somewhere else, And left—
smoke and the blood of a man*

And the finished steel, chilled and blue.

*So fire runs in, runs out, runs somewhere else again, And the bar of
steel is a gun, a wheel, a nail, a shovel, A rudder under the sea, a steering-
gear in the sky; And always dark in the heart and through it, Smoke and
the blood of a man.*

Pittsburg, Youngstown, Gary—they make their steel with men.

*In the blood of men and the ink of chimneys The smoke nights write
their oaths:*

Smoke into steel and blood into steel;

Homestead, Braddock, Birmingham, they make their steel with men.

Smoke and blood is the mix of steel.

“Smoke and Steel,” Carl Sandburg



*“WE NEVER KNOW HOW HIGH we are,
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies—”*

At the word “high,” a round of snickering broke through the classroom. But Dr. Willa Weil ignored it. When she recited a poem, only the words existed.

She finished writing the lines on the blackboard, then turned to look down at her class. A dozen bored and dozing undergrads stared blankly back at her. Not unusual for a Tuesday lecture. Not unusual for any day, for that matter. “Great Women Poets” failed to draw the most enthusiastic crowd. It was a gen ed. Nothing more than a hoop for students to jump through before they entered the world to pursue careers and families and lives, leaving all thoughts of poetry behind as a distant memory.

But they weren’t there yet. Three hours a week, Willa had their ear, and she was determined to make the most of it. It was work that she had been doing for the better half of a decade. Whatever their intentions, if students were here, she would don her dark pencil skirt and gray cardigan and put everything she had into teaching them.

“What do you think Dickinson is trying to tell us here?” She infused her question with as much warmth and hospitality as she could muster. The students stared back like witnesses being grilled by a defense attorney.

“Sean what do you—” she stopped herself mid-question, staring at the empty seat. Sean Moretti, her prized pupil, was nowhere to be seen.

Sean never missed a class. Never showed up later than ten minutes early. Never shirked a chance to respond to her questions. His absence was odd, to say the least.

In truth, she had come to rely on him as much as she had the texts themselves. Without him, she would be left pulling teeth. Even while discussing her most beloved verses, an hour and a half was an eternity when her questions came back empty. Willa tried not to cast blame. Twelve years of traditional education had a way of darkening even the

most poetic of souls. Still, humans were made for the light of beauty; she hoped that her efforts might just provide a spark.

She sighed, adjusted her oversized glasses, then plunged ahead undaunted.

“Emily Dickinson is speaking about heroism. The hidden virtues within ourselves that we deny daily, rather than risk showing to the world. Our world pampers us, coddles us, leads us to believe life can be a safe and simple thing. But she knew the truth. You cannot hide forever. One day, destiny will call, and your true mettle will be revealed. Destiny will show you the plan the universe has for you. The question is, on that day, how high will you rise?”

An hour later, Willa yielded to the lack of interest in the room and released her weary pupils. If the words of Emily Dickinson weren't enough to rouse them, she didn't stand a chance. Looking again toward the empty seat, a tinge of worry swept through her. It was so unlike Sean.

“Hey Sarah,” Willa said to a young woman about to leave the room. The girl seemed startled, afraid that Willa would attack.

“Yeah?”

“It's fine, you're not in trouble. Just wondering if you knew where Sean was?”

The girl relaxed. “Sorry, I haven't seen him. He missed biology yesterday too. Which sucks cause I usually bum notes off him.”

Willa nodded. “Okay. Just curious. Thanks.”

Sarah and the rest of the class shuffled out while Willa gathered her things. Lastly, she turned to clean the blackboard for the next professor.

Dickinson's words stared down at her. She hesitated, then hastily erased the chalk and bolted from the room.

Tonight, she would see how high she could rise.

CHAPTER TWO



DIM LIGHTS BLINKED down on Willa as she made her way through Oakland, the side of town that housed Pittsburgh's major universities. The streets were quiet, although she could hear the traffic of the city echoing from a few blocks away.

Sean Moretti was a sophomore at the University of Pittsburgh, where Willa taught. It wasn't hard to find his apartment.

Normally, a student missing a couple days of class wouldn't have raised any alarms. Students bailed on classes all the time—despite their complaints about the expense of the enterprise. But Sean wasn't like other students. He never missed. Ever.

He had taken at least one class with Willa every semester. Once, he showed up just as class was ready to begin with blood trickling down the side of his head. Carnage from some sort of longboard accident. After class, he sent her a 700-word email by way of apology.

No way he missed class without a word, let alone two days' worth. Willa had checked with his other professors. The kid was AWOL.

Still, a normal professor wouldn't go to this length to check in on a student in a major course, let alone a nameless face from an elective.

But Willa was no ordinary professor.

She was a magician, born into a sacred order, and able to wring tremendous power out of her words. Well, not *her* words. The words of the greats. Byron. Whitman. Shakespeare. And yes, Dickinson. Poets from all cultures and ages. Poetry, unbeknownst to nearly all who wrote and who read it, held a deep power. A power that Willa could access, and which now drew her into the dark streets of Oakland, searching for a missing student.

She pulled her dark peacoat tight against the cold. It kept her warm yet didn't add much flair to her already monochrome ensemble. Willa liked her words extravagant; her clothes understated.

As she moved down the sidewalk, she couldn't help but wonder what the old man would think if he knew she was out here. Strictly speaking, Willa wasn't allowed to use her gifts this way. There were rules, after all. But she'd have to worry about that later. She had to know if her student was safe.

"Hey, you got the time?"

Willa jumped at the voice breaking through her thoughts. A man stepped out from under a darkened doorway. He wore faded camo pants with sneakers that were once white. The smell of old booze and fresh cigarettes wafted toward her.

She checked her watch. "Yeah. It's just after midnight."

"Thanks," the man said. He stared at her like he wanted something more.

"Look," she said. "I have a rule against giving money to strangers. Sorry."

The man stared harder. "That's some racist bullshit if I've ever heard it. All I asked you for was the time. What makes you think I need your charity?"

Willa's pale cheeks flushed red. "I'm sorry. I... I'm just sorry. You're right."

The man nodded. "It's fine. But, uh, if you did have any change to spare, it'd be appreciated."

He held out his hand and broke into a wide smile.

Willa stared at him for a second then laughed. She pulled out a ten, the only bill she had and gave it to him.

"That was smooth," she admitted.

The money disappeared, and his smile widened. "That's why they call me King, Beautiful. Now, what are you doing out here on a cold night like this?"

"Just looking for my friend's apartment. He lives in the lofts."

King nodded, then pointed down the lane. "Looks like you're on the right path. See you around."

"Thanks, King," she said, then moved on, stealing a quick glance over her shoulder.

Sean, like many students, made his home in a row of industrial buildings turned apartments. Far from luxurious, they were generally safe and cheaper than the school's housing. No one manned the front door, so Willa slipped in as a group of students tumbled out.

He lived in the last apartment down a shoddily lit corridor on the third floor. Music and muffled conversation pumped through the walls, yet as Willa reached Sean's place, she could tell something was off. No sound came from Sean's corner, and a cool draft blew out from the crack under his door. She touched the knob, and the door pushed open as if broken.

Willa froze, fear racing through her veins. Her instincts usually guided her well, but she prayed that this time they'd be wrong.

She held her hands stiff by her side, a poem rising quickly to her lips. No matter how frightened she was, if something waited for her on the other side, she would be prepared.

Willa left the lights off, leaving the view of the apartment limited

to the glow from the hallway. Even in the dim light, the place was clearly a wreck—not what she expected from Sean Moretti. Truthfully, she knew little about him outside of his school work, but his papers were always meticulous, and she assumed his apartment would follow suit.

That is, unless someone had torn it apart intentionally.

A cheap chair, thrown to the side and a broken particle board coffee table were the only discernible pieces of furniture. The floor was covered with what looked to be magazines. Willa leaned down and picked one up. A comic book. The brightly dressed hero stood tall as foes terrorized before her. Willa fought the urge to laugh.

If only heroes were like that, she thought.

As she moved further into the apartment, the source of the breeze became clear. A hole gaped where the apartment's lone window should have been. Shards of glass littered the floor.

She slowly approached it, looking out into the crisp Pittsburgh night. Peaceful, unlike the apartment she stood in. Violence happened here, although Willa couldn't discern its source. In truth, she didn't know what to look for. She spent her life training in the magical arts, but her craft was mostly theoretical. She had never pursued a villain. Never avenged a wrong. Never saved anyone.

Willa took a breath, pushing away her doubts. Her experience didn't matter, only her capabilities. And she was more than capable. Which meant she was more than complicit if she refused to act. At least, that's what she told herself. Technically, she was breaking and entering. And if the police did arrive, she would look more than guilty standing in the trashed apartment.

She needed to move faster.

Her first plan was to look for anything obviously missing. Maybe she had found a run of the mill breakin. But there was the TV—broken, yet still here. And a video game system of some kind hidden beneath it. What else of value would a college student keep in their apartment?

While she looked around, a short squeak reached her ears. Like the groaning of a loose floorboard. Willa turned toward the source.

It came from the bedroom.

She took another breath, then moved forward.

She stepped quietly, cursing to herself over every rustle of paper that the wind kicked around the room. Her heart threatened to wake the neighborhood. Willa reached slowly toward the doorknob.

Before her fingers touched the metal, the door exploded toward her.

CHAPTER THREE



WILLA LANDED HARD, shards of wood rained down around her. Instinct drove her flight, and she crawled backward as fast as humanly possible.

Escape was her sole priority.

Away from the person standing over her.

He was huge, almost completely filling out the door frame. Willa stared up in shock. He wore a three-piece suit—it's high quality clear, even in the dim light. Fists the size of bowling balls burst from the end of his sleeves. He looked like he could bench press a river barge.

It wasn't his size or lavish attire that drew Willa's attention, but the black ski mask that covered his massive head. Its large holes for his eyes and mouth gave him a monstrous air.

"Well, well, well," he laughed. "Looks like I'm going to have some fun tonight after all."

Willa scrambled to her feet. The sight of him glaring down at her pushed away all of her fear.

Something replaced it. Something strong.

She smiled in reply. "Well, that depends on how much you like poetry."

Before he could move the words shot past her lips.

"I took my Power in my Hand— And went against the World— 'Twas not as much as David—had— But I— was twice as bold—"

A simple poem, one Willa had studied since youth. Simple, but effective. She pushed her hands forward, the reflex connected to a spell like this. Blue energy burst forth from her fingertips.

The man lunged at her, but the energy caught him full in the chest, slamming him against the apartment's cheap walls. The resulting thud was like music to her ears.

He fell to his knees.

Willa stepped toward him, her hands still raised. She didn't rightfully know what a spell of that nature could do to a person, but she imagined it would more than take the wind out of him.

"What happened here? Where's Sean?"

Her words poured over the man, but they didn't move him. He remained statue-still where he had fallen.

A moment of doubt struck the young poet. She hoped her spell hadn't been too powerful. She took a step forward.

That's when the man pounced.

He moved incredibly fast for his size, launching from his knees like a sprinter from the starting blocks. Willa attempted another spell, but the words were lost as he crashed into her—a wrecking ball of human muscle.

The coffee table would have broken her fall if it wasn't already shattered. She landed hard on her backside for the second time.

When she looked up, the man was halfway through the broken window. She jumped to her feet and ran to the open space.

He sprinted away into the darkness, thirty feet below, without even a limp.

Willa bolted through the apartment complex and out the front door, but by then he was already gone.

“What the hell was that?” a man gruffed.

She turned, as King emerged again from the shadows. He stared in the same direction she did, mouth opened wide.

“I don't know,” she said.

“Dude dropped from the sky. Landed, and hauled ass.”

Sirens, growing louder, could be heard over the sound of the highway. Willa turned for the alley, deciding not to wait around to see if they were singing for her.

Men were fragile things, little more than paper and chalk held together by foolish pride. She pictured her attacker, taking the full force of her spell like it was nothing, leaping unharmed from a third-story window. Men were not made to move like that.

King's voice followed her down the alley.

“What the hell is happenin' in Pittsburgh?”



THERE ARE 446 BRIDGES in Pittsburgh, beating out Venice for the record by three.

Elijah was pretty certain he had crossed every damn one of them.

Unfamiliar with the city, he depended on the GPS app on his phone. He crossed the Smithfield Street Bridge, over the Monongahela River, which waited for winter to make its attempt at icing her over. Elijah turned left on Fort Pitt Boulevard, a corridor surrounded by a line of downtown buildings on one side and the river on the other. Traffic was light for an urban center in midday—but maybe only in comparison to the gridlock of Boston. He had only been gone for forty-eight hours but already felt lighter than he had for years.

Enough luggage for a month weighed down the car—though he'd be staying for nearly six. The initial stretch down I-95 away from Massachusetts refreshed him. A recent ex-fiancé, a failed job search, and a mildly sociopathic roommate were all in his rearview mirror—further away than they appeared.

Pittsburgh was a new start.

Elijah took two right turns, which landed him in the heart of Market Square—a quaint little urban plaza in the shadow of the PPG Tower. PPG's distinct spires stood out when he first entered the city, but up-close, Elijah was struck by its glass exterior, reflecting the image of the metropolis that sprawled out beneath it. Meandering around the base of the building, he spotted the parking garage and pushed the nose of his '99 Outback toward the gate.

I hope they pick up the tab, he thought, pulling a ticket from the machine.

Elijah found a spot between two large SUVs. He took the elevator to the 38th floor and stepped out at the ding.

Alarawn Industries filled the entire floor. Rather than opening into a foyer, the elevator deposited Elijah directly into the bustling corporate offices. His tweed jacket with its worn leather elbow patches made it clear that he didn't belong there. A young receptionist with hair pulled back tight enough to cause a headache smiled as he approached. "You must be Mr. Branton."

Elijah coughed. "Doctor. It's, uh, Dr. Branton." He immediately felt

like a douche bag.

The woman's face turned a shade of pink. "Oh, yes. I apologize, *Dr. Branton*. Ms. Alarawn is waiting for you. I'm Laurie, her executive assistant. Can I get you an espresso or something before you go in?"

Elijah pushed his hand through his hair and gave her the broadest grin possible. Trying to negate his douchiness, he said, "Oh, no worries. I'm good. But thank you, Laurie. That's very kind."

He overdid it.

He always did.

The receptionist stood; she was nearly his height. "Come with me." She smiled again, this time a little forced.

They wove through a section of cubicles. Elijah inconspicuously took in the view from behind.

"Zumba?" he asked, trying to break the ice he had created.

"Excuse me?"

"You look like you work out. You do Zumba or something?"

"Cross Fit," she replied. "You?"

"Typing, mostly. Some heavy reading mixed in for muscle confusion."

She warmed—just a little.

The worker-bee din of the cubicles faded as they ambled down the hallway past the executive offices. From open doors, he could hear businessmen making their business deals—a foreign language to his academic ears. This wing seemed exclusively reserved for overeducated, upper-class, white males.

All of them, except for Brooke Alarawn.

The hall terminated at two enormous mahogany doors accessorized with oversized brass handles. The receptionist grabbed the levers and pushed the doors open. The dramatic effect, no doubt intended, did its job.

The Chief Executive's office was the size of a regulation basketball court. Elijah took it in, appreciating the clean design. Photographs chronicling the steel industry's rise tastefully filled the walls. Metal adorned everything, making the open space gleam from the natural light that poured in from nearly every angle.

Brooke Alarawn sat behind a mahogany desk. Its stain matched the doors, and it seemed larger than Elijah's apartment. She stood as he entered. Younger-looking than he expected, and objectively beautiful, she placed both hands behind her back and flashed the most perfect smile money could buy.

"Dr. Branton, welcome." The enthusiasm in her voice was unmistakable. She was either extremely excited about his arrival, or he had just met the best damn liar in town.

Trying to exude a confidence that he'd never mastered, he reached

out and shook her hand. "Please, call me Elijah."

Brooke Alarawn stood naturally at five foot something but reached six feet in her black heels. Her face was angular, emphasized with a modicum of blush on the cheeks and a smoky eye fit for the runway. But her lips took center stage. They were full and blood red—the perfect contrast to the flawless teeth they veiled.

Part CEO, part socialite, Brooke Alarawn was a complicated woman. A month before she would graduate top of her class from Yale with a degree in International Economics, Brooke's parents had crashed their private plane deep in the Sierra Nevadas. The authorities ruled out foul play and blamed the tragedy on her father's piloting abilities. An independent investigation concluded the same.

As an only child, she left the ivied world of academia and returned to the Steel City to captain the family ship.

Elijah had done his homework—which wasn't difficult, as she often adorned the covers of gossip mags and entertainment TV. A major cable network had even offered to create a reality show around her life—an offer too garish for her taste. A recent scandal involving her breakup with a local sports figure Elijah had never heard of still filled the pages of the tabloid rags. But mostly, Alarawn attempted to keep a low profile. It also was no secret that during the early months of the recession, the company nearly claimed bankruptcy. Brooke Alarawn had set her eyes on bringing it back. Now, at thirty-two, she was still one of the youngest major CEOs in the nation.

"Grab a seat, Elijah," she said, directing him towards the most comfortable chair his ass had ever had the pleasure of meeting. "Can I get you anything? Water? Bourbon?"

Bourbon at a 10 a.m. meeting? What decade is this?

He half-expected her to offer him a cigarette. "No, thanks, I'm good."

Elijah's hand trembled slightly as he reached into his attaché. Made from cracking, synthetic leather, it was likely older than even his thrift-store blazer. It struck him for the first time that he sat with one of the wealthiest and most powerful women in the country. His first-day-on-the-job nervousness turned into fear in the face of power. His research hadn't prepared him for this. Pulling out three loose sheets of paper from the satchel, Elijah placed them on the table.

Brooke's eyes surveyed the paper.

"My CV, if you need it." His voice cracked.

"Pardon me?"

"Sorry. *Curriculum Vita*. It's what we call a resume."

"I know what a CV is, Dr. Branton, but I certainly don't need it. We did a thorough background check. I know more about you than you know about yourself."

Realizing his naiveté, his temperature rose. “Naturally.”

Strike one.

Brooke handed a padfolio across the table. “Before I say anything else, you will need to sign a non-disclosure statement. The typical things, really. No talking with the media—or anyone—about your research. You’ll have access to sensitive documents about the company—and our family. Let’s just say the Alarawn skeletons must remain in the closet. Further, you will be allowed to publish an academic paper for a journal of *our* choosing, but only after my team goes over it with a fine-toothed comb.”

So, much for academic freedom, he thought.

Despite any reservations, Elijah breezed through the document. If it required the donation of a testicle, he’d likely still sign the thing. Desperate times, and all that. If Alarawn Industries had done their research, they would know this as well. He pulled out a cheap Bic pen and signed on the line.

“Good then, let’s get started, shall we?” Brooke asked. “Your task over the next six months is to write a thorough history of Alarawn Industries. You’ll submit weekly reports directly to me.” She leaned back in her executive chair and seemed to admire her own office. “My great-great grandfather Thomas worked for Carnegie. The family emigrated in 1860. Instead of going to school, Thomas became a ‘coal boy’ at the age of thirteen. I’m sure you’ll dig some things up on his life. Thomas was smart and a hard worker. He did everything right. After years of climbing the ladder into management, he finally got a break that landed him in corporate—a very lucrative position. Typical American dream.”

Yeah, very typical, Elijah thought, remembering his own blue-collar upbringing.

“But he rejected that dream, the life given to him, and chose to make something of his own. He left Carnegie and created his own business, his own empire. It was that grit and determination that allowed him to build Alarawn Industries.”

Elijah had read the family’s history a dozen times in as many books. Hearing the heiress recount it gave him something that none of the pages could.

Heart.

“Alarawn Industries means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

She exhaled, and he could feel her icy demeanor melt, if only a little. Closing her eyes, she nodded. “It means the world to me. Everything, really. This company and this city.”

Brooke Alarawn rose, pushing the executive chair back. She walked over to the glass on the west side of the office. “Join me, Elijah.”

From their vantage point, the surrounding downtown buildings were children's toys. The view of The Point—a park sitting at the confluence of the three rivers—lay before them like a model meticulously built by a master craftsman.

“Thomas Alarawn was a significant link in the industrial chain that made this city truly great.”

Elijah recalled the city as described in several texts he brought with him. Buildings covered in soot, air filled with smog, water unsafe to drink. He resisted interrupting his new benefactor's reverie with these sordid details. Nor did he mention the significant human rights violations associated with steel.

“I love this city, Elijah. It's a part of me, and in many ways, I am a part of it. Most people think our future is in medicine or tech, but there is a place here for Alarawn Industries. Steel will always be Pittsburgh's backbone.” The historian's eyes wandered to PNC Park and through the historic North Side. She placed her hand on his back, which made him distinctly aware of his old tweed jacket. “You're going to be the first stage of our re-emergence. Your report, our story, will remind this city of why they need us. And of what we're capable of offering them. We're calling it Project Cold Steel—a little inside joke within the family.”

Elijah nodded, biting back the thought that Cold Steel sounded more like a shitty death metal band than a history report.

Brooke paced back to her desk. “You'll have the full power of the company at your disposal.” She reached into the top drawer and threw a set of keys on the desk. They slid across the polished surface like a puck on the ice. “Access to our archives and an office here—if you choose to use it.”

“Better than any teaching job I've had.”

“I aim to please.” Brooke's eyes locked on his. They were serious, but Elijah could sense a softness behind them. Maybe sadness.

“Oh, we also have a loft for you in the Cultural District. It's modest—two bedrooms, two baths. I expect it will be fine for you.” She gave him a smile that felt more manufactured than the steel her family had churned out for generations. “Where do you want to start?”

Thought I'd move in and grab a quick shower.

“Well, I like to be *in* the contexts I study. I read that the original mill is still standing?”

“Barely. But it's there.”

Elijah, a sucker for post-industrial ruins, smiled. “Good. I'll eventually need to head out and take a look around.”

Brooke pressed a button on her phone. The doors swung open almost before she could remove her finger.

A man twice the breadth of Elijah walked in. The clean shave of

his head and a set of sharp eyes made it difficult to judge his age.

“This is Rex Bertoldo. He’s my personal assistant. Whenever you’re ready, he’ll accompany you to the site in Homestead. It’s not exactly the safest neighborhood.”

Elijah smiled at the man; the expression wasn’t reciprocated. Elijah ignored the slight. “Brooke, I can’t explain how excited I am about this project. Thank you. Really.”

“It’s my pleasure. Don’t let us down.” She paused. “I almost forgot. I have something for you.” She slid a small white box across the table.

Opening it, Elijah found a round metal disk not much larger than his palm. Etched into the medal was a square, intersected by two sharply pointed ovals. It looked to Elijah like a symbol that evoked fire and power.

Or maybe danger.

“Um, thanks.”

“It’s not a gift, Dr. Branton, but another puzzle to solve. This is an heirloom my great-aunt passed down to me. She was our family historian, of sorts. Personally, I find it dreadful. But it belonged to Thomas, and I haven’t been able to figure out what it means or where it came from. If you stumble across any information during your research I’d be grateful. And maybe it will bring you some luck.”

I’m going to need it.



CHEM FELT AS INCONSPICUOUS as a clown at a funeral. He tried to keep his cool as the bleary-eyed guard stared at his credentials. He smiled, but not too wide. Keeping his arms relaxed at his side, he fought the urge to shift from foot to foot.

The giant of a man in the uniform looked down at the ID, up to Chem, then back at the ID. A second later he barked into his university-issued cell phone.

It's just a routine thing, Chem told himself. He doesn't know anything. Just let him do his job. Hell, he's probably just being thorough. Or racist.

No matter how nerdy Chem might look in his lab coat, a towering black man walking the halls of a chemistry lab in the middle of the night tended to draw attention from security.

Finally, the light on the guard's scanner turned green.

"Sorry for the mix-up, Dr. Scott." The man looked down at the floor as he handed back the identification card.

Chem smiled at the sound of his proper name. "Technically, it's just Mr. Scott. But my friends all call me Chem. They're not too creative."

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever."

Chem considered laying into the man, make sure the guy wouldn't pull a stunt like this on him again. Instead, he snatched his credentials and turned for the door without a peep. It was the smarter choice. He wanted to make as little of an impression as possible on security.

After all, the ID was a fake. And the guard just greenlit his trespassing for the night.

Normally, Chem would head east toward the labs. They were relatively safe—most people paid little attention to anything other than their research. But tonight, Chem took the more dangerous route toward the west wing of the complex. More dangerous, but far more valuable.

Chem's feet echoed down the empty corridor. At this time of night, and this time of year, the University's Medical and Chemical Research Division was practically a ghost town. Students were too busy partying. Professors were too busy enjoying the relative calm of the semesters' early weeks. Which suited Chem just fine.

He preferred the solitude anyway. It made breaking and entering all the easier.

Chem slid the fake access card into his bag, next to his real one. The one actually issued to Percival Carver Scott—and deactivated several months ago. He didn't know why he kept it. It was nothing more than a symbol of how far he'd fallen.

He turned right down Hallway B, avoiding the working security cameras on A.

Once Chem had been a prized asset of the academic community, a rising star. But the University had since disavowed all connection with him.

He couldn't blame them though. The breakup was mostly his fault. Failure to produce results, the debacle with the research ethics board, and even his half-assed performance in the classroom provided a compelling case against him. Without tenure and few political allies, it was a fight he couldn't win.

He stepped into an open classroom and paused for a second, letting two voices pass down the hallway. Grad students, burning the midnight oil.

Suckers, Chem thought. *Wasting their talent working to make someone else's name and someone else's buck.* He wished he had a grad student of his own to boss around.

Getting canned by the faculty left Chem without a job, and without proper access to the supplies he needed. The lack of supplies was a relatively easy fix. Thanks to the technological prowess congregating around Pittsburgh's several fine universities, it wasn't difficult for the defrocked professor to find a hacker who could be bought for a couple bills. And for a couple bills more, he received his totally serviceable fake ID—and an open door to the supplies he needed.

The lack of a real job, however, was a harder fix. He had a couple less than legal irons in the fire to hold him over, but none of that would be necessary once he completed his research. Once he finished the Vida Serum.

Media attention on DARPA, The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, revolved around exoskeletons and other technical enhancements—devices that increased soldier speed and lifting capacities. Front-line machines that could replace their biological counterparts also held the public's eye. And why not? That stuff was a Tony Stark kind of sexy. Robots made good headlines and fit the techno-utopian vision that most Americans swore by.

But Chem didn't care about that high-profile, sci-fi bullshit. His interests were focused on what went *into* a soldier.

It wasn't as if biochemical enhancements didn't exist in the military world, they just failed to garner the same press. Altered

caffeine pills kept soldiers awake, and Ritalin provided extreme focus. Strictly speaking, the US military had been using chemistry on its troops since before it was called the US military. Washington administered vaccines to his troops to counteract British biological warfare in the form of smallpox—a type of combat that had been terribly successful against the native people years before.

Chemistry and biology could kill in ways tech never could. A lifetime ago, when he was a foolish youth, Chem had set out to create just that. Something that could create the perfect killing machine. Now, a decade later, that work had led him here. Sneaking around a college lab in the middle of the night.

From a foolish youth to a foolish adult. That will make for a great biography, he thought to himself.

He took the stairs up a level, then back down a few hundred yards later. This kept him out of the watchful eye of an administrative assistant who was friendly in the, “Why yes judge, I remember exactly who I saw on the night of the incident” kind of way. Before exiting the stairwell, he took off his lab coat and replaced it with the zip up hoodie from his bag. The lab coat was kind of his signature look—not something you’d want remembered if you happened to find yourself before a jury.

This was his life now—unattached to a school or lab, stealing the supplies he needed, stepping on, or in some cases way over several laws regarding unsanctioned chemical research. Discovery took risk. Chem knew that better than anyone. But he couldn’t stop. Not now. Not ever. Not until the work was complete. The Vida Serum. The answer to Chem’s problems.

Left, right, straight, left.

He had navigated the labyrinthine building for years when his work was more or less legitimate. And now, when getting caught could land him in prison, that work paid off.

Before him stood the secured chemical supply closet, a veritable grocery store of hard to get goods.

Sure, there would be a clear record of his having entered the building. That couldn’t be helped. There were enough faces around that recognized him, so he couldn’t go with a fake name for his fake ID. But the complex was huge, and there was zero evidence that he was anywhere near the supply closet. If a few items went missing every couple week, who would be there to point the finger at him?

He didn’t even work there.

The key Chem pulled from the stash pocket of his bag was more difficult to obtain than the hacked ID. It took several rounds of laced drinks with an old colleague. Rohypnol wasn’t just a date-rape drug, after all. Poor Michael likely got chastised for his “absent-

mindfulness,” and maybe even had to pay a fine to replace the “lost” key, but science was a costly endeavor.

He’d pay his friend back with plenty of interest if he ever solved the damn problem.

Chem stepped through the doorway, his eyes adjusting to the dimness. Auxiliary lights would have to do; cameras kept a watchful eye on every square inch of the place. He knew just what he needed and where it would be anyway. The same key unlocked the cabinets.

The base of Chem’s serum was a neurotransmitter inhibitor called gamma-aminobutyric acid. The snake oil salesmen called it GABA—the fountain of youth. Soccer moms around the country swallowed the stuff by the fistfuls in an attempt to counteract the anxiety created by grandé lattes and screaming kids. And while GABA’s theoretical benefits might sound good in an advertisement, oral dosages would have the same chance of crossing the blood-brain barrier as a fourteen-year-old boy had of getting into an upscale gentlemen’s club.

Which meant the pills didn’t do jack shit. It was the problem Chem had spent every waking hour of the last two years trying to solve.

GABA could be found at any health store, but he was engaging in this particular act of larceny for something harder to come by. He waved his phone in front of the shelves to illuminate the labels. A muscle relaxant called Baclofen. The right combination of these two drugs might just solve the next step of Chem’s riddle. One step out of ten thousand. But progress was progress, and Chem wasn’t about to sneer at a potential answer.

Chem snatched a bottle of pills and dropped them into his messenger bag, happy with a job well done. His grin faded as footsteps and a faint whistling approached the storeroom.

Scoring drugs was on his to-do list—a fistfight with a security guard was not. Chem’s strength was his mind—and his will—not his body. Fumbling with another cabinet, he found something nestled in a plastic bag that would do the trick in a pinch. He grabbed a handful, crouched, and prayed he wouldn’t need what was in the bag, that the footsteps would just pass by.

They didn’t.

The door opened with the creak of a B-grade horror film. Overhead halogen lights flashed on just as the chemist ducked behind a cart of empty beakers and five-gallon buckets. His eyes cut over to the cabinet.

Shit.

The door was ajar. Scientists pride themselves on their precision. How could he have been so careless?

His uninvited guest had seen it too. “Hello? Somebody in here?”

Chem held his breath like a Japanese pearl diver.

“Hey, Ken, it’s me.”

A radio crackled to life: “*Yeah, Bill. What’s up?*”

Chem cursed under his breath.

The voice was a familiar one—Bill, a fifty-year-old guard working the halls at night, so his little girl could attend class for free during the day. The man was friendlier than a golden retriever and just as loyal. The chemist would often take a break from his lab on the other end of the complex and join the night guard as he sucked down a cancer stick on the front steps.

He liked Bill—but not enough to serve time. This was going to have to be perfect.

Static, and then another line from the radio. “*You need me to come down?*”

Bill laughed. “Sure. You could use the exercise, and we might need to sweep the place. I got an open cabinet.”

“*Roger that.*”

A lab towel with the iconic mascot was just within reach. It would serve as a makeshift mask, and Chem tied it over his face like a bandit from the wild west who was really into college basketball.

His steady hands worked fast. He opened one of the tiny plastic bags he’d palmed from the shelf and shook it. A piece of metal the size of a ten-sided die tumbled around inside. Cesium—a soft pyrophoric element. From the Greek, meaning fire bearing. He pulled a water bottle from his bag, broke the seal, and took a long drink.

Looking under the table, he could see Bill’s legs across the room. The guard stood directly in front of the storage cabinet. Chem did a quick calculation and blew on his hand, hoping to rid it of any condensation. In one fluid movement, he grabbed the Cesium, flipped it into the water bottle, and twisted the cap in place. Without hesitation, he slid the bottle under the long lab table toward his old acquaintance.

Chem blocked his ears and put his head between his legs.

The blast split through the room. The deafening chemical explosion was accompanied by the tumult of shattering glass on steel. The reaction was perfectly timed and placed. Chem leapt to his feet and shot for the door. He cleared an overturned cart and caught a glimpse of a crumpled mass under an upended table. He prayed to whatever gods might exist that Bill was okay.

The hallway was still empty, but it wouldn’t be for long. Exiting through the front would be a mistake. He pulled his hood over his head and angled toward the rear emergency exit. His heart jackedhammered in his ears, his lungs screaming.

I’m not in any shape for this shit.

Coming to a T in the corridor, Chem groped the wall and

catapulted himself around the corner—directly into the chest of Bill’s brick wall of a shift partner. The maybe-racist who had scanned him in.

“What the hell?” the man shouted.

He was even more imposing out from behind the desk. The security uniform barely fit the guy. He looked like he got the job right after failing off the offensive line.

Though tall, the chemist was rail thin. But he could use his body strategically, and the element of surprise was on his side.

Chem grabbed the man’s uniform; his knee shot upward, targeting the guard’s soft crotch.

Bullseye.

A gravelly groan escaped the lineman’s mouth, and he dropped to a knee.

The researcher wasted no time fleeing through the rear of the building into the brisk December air. Chem compartmentalized his thoughts, shifting from his narrow escape to the promises held in his personal lab.

There is no progress without risk—a line Chem had repeated to himself hundreds if not thousands of times in the past decade. Tonight was peril, plain and simple.

But there would be a breakthrough before the sun rose.



WILLA GROANED AS SHE walked toward the elevator. Her body ached from where she landed on it the previous evening. She felt the bruise with every step toward the Cathedral of Learning. But she had been summoned, so there was nothing she could do.

The Cathedral of Learning was the tallest academic building in the United States—a church devoted to one god—knowledge. Willa couldn't help but feel a sense of awe every time she entered the building. She wondered if some arcane magic gave her that feeling, or if it was just the innate power of architecture.

Ding.

A young couple emerged through the open doors, each clutching a four-dollar coffee. Their conversation, about some viral post on social media, spun them into laughter. Willa sighed. She tried not to judge, not to become like the bitter old professors she knew all too well, but it grew harder every year. The cult of ignorance held sway over the campus. Shallowness of thought, an unwillingness to comprehend the depths of the world—seen and unseen—marked its young minds. It was the young poet's true fight, why she stayed in the academy. Apart from the magic she could pull from poetry, she knew it also had the power to enliven minds. Willa didn't need fame or riches but only a few students to wake up. Even just one would be worth it.

She thought she had found one in Sean.

Stepping into the ancient elevator, she considered the young man. His absence made no sense. Why would someone attack him? Was the quiet soul involved in something nefarious? She shook her head. Somehow, she couldn't picture the bookish young man caught up with the masked assailant.

Her mind wound back to the biggest question of all. Why was that man there? Sean had been absent from class for several days. The apartment was tossed, that was clear. But it felt old to her, like it happened some time ago. If that was true, then what drew the masked man to the place? Why return to the scene of the crime?

She couldn't shake the feeling that the man was a predator, lying in wait. But for what?

Willa pulled the key on a slender chain from around her neck and

inserted it into the elevator panel. She pressed forty. One could push the button all day, but without a key, it would never light. Her stomach turned as the elevator lurched skyward, though she couldn't tell if the lift or the meeting that waited for her caused her gut to churn.

The elevator chugged along, carrying Willa toward the top floor—just one floor up from the Accounting Department. Passing Floor 39 always elicited a smile from the young professor. Who would put the least romantic department possible on the highest public floor? She considered it a waste.

The Babcock Room—a swanky conference space for dignitaries and cabinet meetings—remained one of the only useable areas on the top floor. But down the hall stood a door, hidden away, that always remained locked. She curled her slender fingers into a loose fist and rapped lightly. Holding her breath, she hoped for no response. Perhaps she could slip away unnoticed.

“It's open,” a voice croaked from behind the door.

She grabbed the familiar knob and felt energy pulse through her hand. Stepping through the doorway, Willa froze as warm sunlight beat against her face. The sound of the ocean filled her ears as the smell of sea salt rose in the air. She paid them no heed. Her eyes were fixated on the dozen men in armor running toward her, spears raised to kill.

She was no longer in Pittsburgh.

CHAPTER SEVEN



BRIGHT SUN GENTLY WARMED Willa's skin, a stark contrast from the cool winter morning she had greeted on the streets of the Steel City that morning. The hardwood floor of the academic building was now a soft, sandy soil. It shifted beneath her feet. Willa could feel a warm breeze brush against her cheeks.

She registered all these details in an instant, but her focus remained on the charging soldiers. The sun flashed off their bronze armor, highlighting the intricate designs scrawled into the metal. What would have appeared beautiful in a museum now carried nothing but menace as they rushed toward her.

Willa reacted the only way she knew how.

"Are you a beast of field and tree, Or just a stronger child than me?

O wind, a-blowing all day long,

O wind, that sings so loud a song!"

Wind rushed from behind her, whipping up sand into the men's faces. They staggered, blinded by her attack. She took advantage of their distraction. Her brain instructed her to run.

But there was nowhere safe in sight.

Screams filled the air as men clashed against men, spilling blood with ancient swords and arrows all around her. War raged on as far as she could see. A massive fleet of ships sat against the shore to her right. All of them lit up like giant candles. Smoke filled the sky with giant black mushrooms and whisps for miles. To her left, up a long sloping hill sat a walled city. Soldiers sprung out of its wide gate.

A chariot raced past Willa, just barely missing the young academic. She shook her head. Now wasn't the time for sightseeing. She needed to focus on survival.

She crouched low near a small mound of dirt. It looked man-made, like some sort of crude defense. She turned and started making her way through the warzone. Wherever the hell she was, this wasn't her fight.

She moved quickly, keeping her head down, toward the outskirts of the battle, before running into a dead end—a small group of soldiers fighting hand-to-hand in front of her. She looked for safe passage on either side, but before she found a path through, the

fighters blew to pieces. A giant of a man now stood in their place. Eight feet tall and made of pure muscle, he waited casually, as if out for a walk in the park. But his face told a different story. A hungry smile shone out from under his helmet.

He raised his giant sword and pointed it at her.

“You are no soldier, yet you will die on this plane of battle all the same.”

The sword swung in a vicious arc, threatening to cut Willa in half. But she was ready. She held no sword, wore no armor. Instead, she raised her voice in defense.

“In his hands he took his shield, all glittering: no one ever broke it with a blow or crushed it.”

The giant’s sword shattered, but he was unfazed. He kicked her, his sandal finding its mark like a cannonball. She fell to the sand, gasping for breath.

Raising a spear high, he stepped forward. His laugh echoed over the battlefield, cruel and deep. But then it began to soften. Gone was the hatred, the malice. Instead, Willa could hear something warm in his voice. As he laughed, he shrunk in size. The sand grew cold then disappeared. The light dimmed. Suddenly, she found herself on the floor of a simple office, filled to the brim with old leather-bound books.

An old man stood before her, a mocking smile sticking out from under his white beard.

“Hello, granddaughter,” he said. “You’re getting sloppy.”



WILLA PUSHED HERSELF off the hard floor, her bruise screamed in protest once again. The old man didn't offer her a hand of compassion or even a second look. Instead, he made his way to an old leather chair that could have been made during the Truman administration. Many teachers utilized tough love as a tool in the classroom. For Edwin Weil, hard-nosed discipline was both sole instrument and guiding principle.

A moment ago, the room had been a terror-filled battlefield. Now it resembled nothing more than a professor's office. Towering bookcases made the tiny room feel even smaller. Photographs, mostly black and white, hung haphazardly on the remaining wall space. The esteemed professor Edwin Weil—at various ages—stared back from each photo as he posed alongside famous literary figures. Ginsberg. Borges. O'Connor. Angelou. It was a "Who's Who" of twentieth-century authors—from pulp writers to beat poets to the pop-literary.

The most recent—and current prize possession—was a photo of George R. R. Martin taken just weeks before in Roanoke. Edwin had driven six hours simply to snap a photo with the contemporary bard. The old men could have been brothers with their matching gray beards and physiques that were earned from long days in padded chairs. Their expressions were the only difference. Martin's smile was wide, and his eyes sparkled. Edwin—even in the company of this genius—looked dour.

"Sit," Edwin said with a salty tone. He already had his nose buried in an open text. Willa unearthed a rickety old chair from under a stack of books. Looking for an appropriate place to set them, she squatted and placed the volumes gently on the floor.

Her eyes scanned the shelves. Though there were thousands of books, they were ordered differently each time she visited. Once they seemed to be arranged topically, another time chronologically, and once according to the color of binding. Most of the collection was literature and poetry, but histories, biographies, even scientific studies found their places within the metric ton of paper.

Geographical by author, she thought—guessing at the latest schema. She shook her head at the bizarre inner workings of Edwin's mind.

The old man set the text open on his lap, smoothed the pages with both hands, and carefully pressed a bookmark into its crease. He glanced at the pile of books Willa had just set on the floor. She noticed him grimace, though it wasn't much different than his general countenance.

"The Fields of Troy?" Willa asked. She swallowed a joke about wish fulfillment and him parading around as the god Ares. She tried to keep her smartassery to a minimum when visiting the fortieth floor.

"Ah, I'm glad you haven't forgotten your classics, even if you have forgotten almost everything else I've taught you." The old man adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses. "I think you know why I called you here."

Willa understood *why* she'd been called, but *how* he knew remained a mystery. She was uncertain how Edwin knew anything that went on during her day—though he inevitably did. Much like the rearrangement of his shelves, the nature of his uncanny omniscience escaped her. Though curious, she dared not ask.

The man coveted his secrecy as much as he denied Willa hers.

A dozen different answers ran through Willa's mind, though she kept each one to herself. He hadn't really asked her a question, and besides, she knew there was nothing she could say to hold off the lecture already forming on his lips.

"Magic has rules, Willa. From day one I had you memorize them. Repeating them over and over and over until they sank into your mind, into your bones. And yet, after a decade of training and study, you still fail to grasp them. You can perform wonders with your words, create worlds with the poetry I have taught you, yet my three simple rules elude you. You are no better than a damn freshman, failing to follow the syllabus. We do not use magic in public. We do not use our magic on outsiders. We do not use our magic to fix the world. We—"

"We don't *use* our magic at all, unless we're here in your stuffy office."

"Precisely," he shouted. "And why is that so damn hard?"

Edwin's breath grew heavy as his words echoed through the office. She sat there, unmoving, taking in his frustration, willing her hands not to tremble. He sighed. For all his bluster, Willa knew he could never sustain his anger. Not with her. He cleared his throat and tried to play nice. "How's your father?"

It didn't work. Her eyes narrowed. "How's *your* son?"

Edwin cracked a smile. "*Touché*. You know he and I haven't spoken since you arrived in the city. He denied his own potential long ago and hoped to keep you from my corrupting influence as well."

True, her father's words contained little respect for Edwin. But she

knew the real reason he hated this city, and it had little to do with her grandfather. It was because it reminded him of her mother.

Willa's mom died in Pittsburgh, and her father could never forgive the Steel City for taking away his love.

Willa barely remembered it though—she was such a small child. Her mom had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, that's all. Loss wasn't enough to keep Willa away from her grandfather, and from the magical training that he offered.

"I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my soul."

Willa barely whispered the words.

"Invictus?" the old man sighed. "I'm glad your education plumbed the depths of the English canon."

Though accustomed to his scrutiny, Willa still blushed at his sarcasm.

I'm sure George R. R. Martin would approve, she thought.

"We talked last week. He's the same, always the same." She looked at her watch. "Look, can we just get on with this?"

"Why? Do you have a course to teach?"

The old man was particularly pissy. His attacks didn't surprise her—Willa considered it part of her training. But lately, he refused to pull any punches.

"Master Weil, if there's nothing you'd like to discuss, I'd like to be excused."

"Grandpa works, you know," he shot back.

"Yes, I do, *Master Weil*."

The old man shifted his weight and swiped a hand across his forehead. He never looked young—but recently old age had taken up permanent residence on his brow. "Willa, you knew full well that when you decided to walk this path it wouldn't be easy, but you committed yourself to following my rules. Rules are not meant to confine, but to grant freedom. Only within boundaries is true freedom possible. True success."

She shrugged. "I don't know, last semester's teaching evals were the highest I've ever received."

He slammed his hand on the desk—an uncharacteristically violent act. "You know damn well I'm not talking about the classroom. You shattered every rule I've ever given you last night. And for what?"

"For good," she whispered.

"Excuse me?"

Sitting up straight, Willa pushed the small of her back against the chair and lifted her chin. His presence made her feel small. "I did it for *good*, Master Weil. Or at least I tried to. My student needed help—the kind of help that only my power could provide."

“Pedagogy is power,” the old man fired back. “Your job is to teach them in the classroom, not to save them in the streets. You’re a professor, not some part-time social worker. And you’re certainly no superhero.”

“But what am I then?” She couldn’t keep the anger from her voice. “We’ve been given this gift for a reason. We can work miracles. Shouldn’t we at least try to do some good in this world?”

He sat back heavily in his chair, sighed, and pulled his fingers through his fine white hair. “From the moment I saw you had power, I tried to instruct you. To lead you down the path of wisdom. I’ve trained you, not so you’d run out into the world and seek a fight, but so that you would never have to. But you have learned nothing. Those who use their power to heal the world only serve to poison themselves. Last night, you didn’t save anyone. You revealed your powers to a stranger, and you almost got yourself killed. You didn’t do it for *their* good,” he pointed out the window as he spoke. “You did it for *your* own good. You were selfish and reckless, and worst of all you were stupid. What if word of your deeds gets back to The Guild? You may disregard my teaching, but at least you kept the good sense not to break their rule.”

Their rule. NO NEW MAGIC. Edwin may have failed to convince Willa of his rules, but he managed to cement The Guild’s rule to her brain.

The Guild, she thought. Edwin had been using this particular bogeyman to frighten her since her childhood. A mysterious group of ancient wizards who held absolute power over people like her. One thing she knew: They weren’t fans of the frivolous use of magic. To hear Edwin tell it, their entire purpose was to prevent the use of magic at all.

For thousands of years, The Guild studied and explored the power of language. They took words of power spoken by poets, and, from the shadows, used those words to lead cities and wage wars and shape culture. All in the name of making this world a better place. All that came to an end a hundred years ago. The Guild went on the defensive and removed itself as a power of influence in this world. Instead, it devoted itself to keeping the magical community safe—and secret. As part of their retreat, they imposed an iron-clad law over magicians: No new magic. Despite her life of study, Willa had never touched magic from this century, and barely the last. Edwin introduced her to the Canon—classic poems sanctioned for magical use by The Guild. He drummed into her that the Canon was sufficient, and set up his own rules, designed, in part, to keep her far from the line The Guild had imposed.

His fear of them seemed to rival his anger at her. Most days she

doubted their existence was anything more than another form of control for Edwin to level over her, a lie designed to keep her safe. But her doubts weren't strong enough to allow her to break that law. She didn't know what the consequence of disobedience was, but it wasn't a risk worth taking.

Willa held back tears that threatened to undermine her composure. None of Edwin's words surprised her; she'd heard them a thousand times. From the first day she used her gift to stop a bully in middle school, Edwin had been giving her the same lecture.

Restraint. Composure. Secrecy.

But it all amounted to the same thing. Idleness in the face of danger. Cowardice. Fear.

"Maybe you're right, Master Weil. But locking away the gift that you have—barricading yourself in this tower when you could be making a real difference—is an act of cruelty. I don't care what you or The Guild thinks."

He looked down at his lap, eyes tired and face drawn. "I'm telling you that this course of action is not prudent."

She pictured the man in the ski mask again, leaping from the third story like it was nothing. The wicked smile on his face. "If wisdom calls for anything now, it is precisely this. Something is stirring—I can feel it. I can't sit by while my student is in danger. Not when I could help. If that means I lose you as my Master, if that means I lose you as my grandfather, then so be it."

She stood and left the room, her words hanging in the air behind her.



BROOKE ALARAWN SAT at the foot of an enormous table. Popular legend claimed that it was crafted from dark oak harvested out of a forest in Wales—the ancestral homeland of the Alarawn family. Its wooden surface gleamed from four generations' worth of polishing. If the table could talk, most of those in the room would be criminally indicted.

Large, leather chairs surrounded the table, each accommodating an executive board member—all outfitted with perfect suits. Primarily men, there was a rose or two amongst the thorns. But the roses were anything but sweet.

The room was as cold as the Ohio River in January—more from the countenance of its occupants than anything else.

Brooke stared at them, trying to read their expressions and not liking what she found. The armpits of her business suit were damp. Perspiration was a rarity. But right now, she sweated like a socialist at the Republican National Convention.

Glass lined the room. The northwest window granted a perfect view of the convention center—its roof sloping toward the Allegheny. Even under duress, the familiar sight took Brooke's breath away. She imagined running at the window and jumping through it and flying to the street below. She could float down the river and disappear. The only thing restraining her was that she wouldn't get the benefit of seeing their faces. A smile inadvertently curled on her lips.

Opposite the windows, three large LCD screens were hung specifically for this meeting. Lavine and Hurtle telecast in from some other continent—prioritizing other on-site meetings for companies that weren't dragging bottom. They were professional board members, pulling in five to six figures per corporate seat.

Fong, a multinational businessman in his own right, dialed in from China. Brooke feared him most. Van Pelt—Alarawn Industries' chairman—initially argued that Fong's inclusion was advisory—lending support on overseas relations and opening new markets. She suspected otherwise. His attendance indicated ulterior designs, less than helpful to her and her company.

Their company, that is.

Two years before her father's death, Alarawn Industries had gone through a takeover. It could hardly be called hostile. Mr. Alarawn rolled over and gave it to them like a possum playing dead. He ceded majority control to Van Pelt and company, retaining his position as CEO, but ultimately leaving AI's fate in the board's hands—a board that now sought to dissolve the company against Brooke's wishes.

Dammit, Dad.

He had always told her how important AI was to Pittsburgh. Its factories provided jobs for thousands, its taxes supported the community, its bridges and buildings were literally made with the steel they provided. Her family built this city, and, in return, this city made the Alarawn's wealthy beyond imagination. While other steel mills closed and shipped overseas, her father refused to take their business from the city, refused to place money over the lives of their workers.

He had always told her that Alarawns don't back down, and they never quit. That they were more stubborn than steel.

But in the end, he had quit. He gave in to pressure from the money men and gave up control. And now it was up to Brooke to take it back before the parasites chopped up her family legacy and crippled the city along with it. Up to her to save Pittsburgh.

"What we need right now is penetration," the chairman nearly shouted.

The outburst brought Brooke back to the conference room. She bit her lip, holding back laughter.

"Did you hear me, Ms. Alarawn?" Van Pelt asked.

"I'm sorry, I was running numbers." She tapped her temple. "Did you say you really need *penetration*? Sounds like a personal problem, not a business one."

The middle-aged men in the room chuckled behind their hands. Many of them loved her spunk—and a few despised the chairman.

Van Pelt's face hardened. "Do you think this is funny, Ms. Alarawn?"

"Not at all." Brooke's body quivered with contempt. "I think this is a damn tragedy, Lance."

He hated being addressed by his first name, especially during a meeting, and she knew it. The man pulled on his collar, looked around the room, and then toward the large screens on the wall. "Tell us what's on the table, Fong." His eyes moved back to Brooke. He almost smiled. Brooke turned her eyes toward the LCD and focused on the elderly Asian man, who sat half a world away.

He glanced at a legal pad and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "They're interested. I don't think they're willing to meet our number, but if we played with it a bit, they just might bite."

Brooke's perspiration returned. Every day she fought the same fight. Alarawn Industries had struggled since the mid-80s, and many of their peer corporations had made lucrative deals overseas, dodging the higher wages and regulations at home. Selling made fiscal sense if rising shares were the only figures that mattered.

American businesses forgot that there's a moral ledger too, that goes deeper than dollars and cents.

"You're not hawking my company like a used appliance," she spat. Brooke's left hand clenched her knee beneath the table. Her perfectly manicured nails left four tiny marks. "That's non-negotiable."

The chairman of the board couldn't hold back his delight. "It's not your company anymore, Ms. Alarawn. It's ours. And you can't dictate terms. We have a responsibility to the shareholders."

Brooke had never felt homicidal, not until that moment. Instead of herself jumping from the window, she pictured throwing them out one by one. If only she could take back control of the board, she knew she could save the company. But Van Pelt and his cronies stood in her way, and he had garnered a reputation for getting whatever he wanted, no matter the cost.

"The shareholders? You don't give a shit about them, do you, Lance? All you care about is your own bottom line. My father, his father, and his father before him built this city. When the rest of steel tucked tail and ran like a bunch of whiny bitches, we stayed. AI always knew this was about something bigger than themselves. Pittsburgh needs this business. I can save it."

Brooke stood, her chair rolling back behind her. "Give me time. Project Cold Steel will work. It will reunite the city behind us, like the old days. We stood with Pittsburgh when she was down. She'll stand with us."

A low murmur greeted her response. Several of the veteran board members had known Brooke since her childhood. She knew they agreed with her, but whether they'd confront Van Pelt was another story. All eyes turned to the chairman.

"Eight months." Van Pelt removed his glasses and spun them on the table, casually, like he was ordering lunch. He rubbed his eyes. "The board has discussed this, and we decided to give you eight months to turn the company around. We want results, Ms. Alarawn, or Mr. Fong will continue to broker the deal."

"Watch me," Brooke spat as she spun toward the door. Her demeanor displayed the old tenacity the Alarawn's were known for. One that the board had not seen for years. She could only be glad that none of them saw the tears that broke from the edges of her eyes as she walked through the doorway.

Lance Van Pelt wanted everything.

Brooke Alarawn would stop at nothing to keep her legacy out of his hands.



ELIJAH PUSHED THROUGH the double doors and onto the sidewalk. He had just blustered his way through the first-class session of Research Methods. It sucked, and everyone in there knew it, professor included.

With the money Alarawn Industries promised him, he probably should have just dropped the new classes. But he was knee deep in debt, and he figured teaching a couple lectures a week wouldn't take much time from his real work. Especially if he half-assed them like the one he just delivered.

Elijah knew that when you don't care about truly reaching students, the hourly wage for an adjunct became pretty good—especially once he realized that he could give the same lectures *ad nauseum*. Grading required little more than skimming the first paragraph, last paragraph, and placing some check marks in the margin. He'd go above and beyond every now and then—underline a sentence and draw an exclamation mark next to it. An arbitrary grade at the end. Not too arbitrary. Grade them too low and he was likely to have a visitor during office hours, and the University never complained about high GPAs.

There was a time when teaching would fill Elijah with energy, better than any high he ever experienced. But those days were long gone. Now, his best hope for a meaningful career was to get tenure, farm out his teaching duties to grad students, and spend his days in peace and quiet doing research.

Brooke Alarawn was the exact person to help him achieve this. If his work for her and Project Cold Steel garnered national attention, he could leverage that into a tenure track position. The dream job.

But to do that, he needed to finish this damn puff piece about Alarawn Industries.

He pushed up his sleeve and checked his watch. *Plenty of time*, he thought. Rex Bertoldo, Brooke's meat locker of an assistant, was scheduled to pick him up in twenty minutes and lead him to one of AI's old factories. But if he was going to spend his afternoon shuffling through dirt and rust, he needed some caffeine first.

He pulled out his phone and Googled the nearest coffee place. Kiva

Han—the shop with the best reviews—was nearby. He walked south toward Forbes, half watching the sidewalk, half reading emails.

“Hey, man. You got a cigarette for the King?”

Elijah glanced up at the homeless man. And then back down at his shoes. His pace quickened. They always made him uncomfortable.

“It’s cool. A hello will do,” the man said to Elijah’s back as his pace quickened.

The coffee shop was packed. He met eyes with the nose-ringed, dreadlocked barista and wove through the crowd toward the counter. Two steps from his caffeine fix, he bumped into a woman turning with her own purchase in hand.

“Crap.” She shook her hand, drops of blazing coffee splashed to the floor.

“Oh, shit. I’m so sorry.” His eyes moved from her hand up to her face. She had a modest beauty that would go unnoticed in the bar scene, but it was one that he had come to adore among young intellectuals.

“Yeah. That’s hot,” the woman said.

“That’s not the only thing.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that you look fit. Zumba?” He smiled. Charm was never his strong suit, and he had no idea why he kept trying that line. But he figured there was little harm in it.

The woman glanced up. Strange words fell from her mouth:

“It’s all about sex and territory, which are what will finish us off in the long run. Some cat owners around here should snip a few testicles. If we wise hominids were sensible, we’d do that too.”

She turned and walked away.

Elijah remained planted, unable to move. Shock and humiliation colored his cheeks.

“Wow,” he finally uttered to no one in particular.

“Don’t worry about her, man. She can’t take a joke.”

Elijah spun, looking a tall black guy in the chest. His eyes wandered up. The man looked like Cornel West and Morpheus had a baby.

“I’ve been trying to talk to her for years. Nothing like that move you just pulled, but she’s immune to even my far more graceful charms.”

Elijah nervously ran his hands through his hair. “Yeah, I’m out of practice. Mostly just talk to librarians these days.”

The man laughed. “Well, that one, she’s literature or poetry or some shit. But, she’d rather spend the night with her cats than a Longfellow, if you know what I mean.” The man patted Elijah on the arm. “Stay out of trouble, okay?”

Elijah grinned and scratched his beard. "I'll try."

With his black coffee in hand, Elijah moved toward the door. He considered sitting and skimming through the latest issue of *The Atlantic* to burn some time, but the place was packed.

"You want to join me?" the Morpheus look-alike called from a table on the edge of the room.

Making friends had never been easy. He'd only been in Pittsburgh for a few days, but already he felt a familiar loneliness. Elijah pulled out the chair and sat. "Thanks. Nice to talk to another human. I just got into town this week."

"Well, welcome to Shitsburgh."

"That bad, huh?" Elijah asked.

The man laughed. "Only in the winter...which starts in August and lasts until May."

A composition pad was opened in front of him. Elijah caught a glimpse of chemical symbols and formulas. Seeing him look, the man flipped the book closed and asked, "Which department?"

Elijah's eyes moved from the book to the man's face. "What?"

"What discipline do you teach in?"

"Oh, right. History. Twentieth-century."

The man grinned and leaned back. "With that beard, those glasses, and your prowess with the fairer sex, I would've guessed philosophy."

Elijah couldn't help laughing. "I get that all the time. History's much more lucrative."

His new friend nodded in appreciation. "So, history man, you tenure-track?"

"Is anybody tenure-track anymore? That is, anybody under fifty?"

It was the other man's turn to laugh. He pushed his hand across the table open in front of Elijah. "I'm Percy. Percy Scott. But people call me Chem."

"Elijah." The historian's hand got swallowed in his Chem's giant palm.

"How about you?" Elijah asked.

"Research. Chemistry—thus the name. Us scientists aren't the most creative bunch. I taught a class or two during my tour at Vanderbilt. Found out pretty fast the classroom wasn't the place for me."

"That's why you decided to do research?" Elijah asked.

"Nope. That's why I decided to go to medical school."

"Med school? You went all the way through med school to do research?"

The man slid his palm around the side of his neck and then up over his head. He hesitated. "I got to clinicals. Then realized that wasn't for me either. Or maybe I should say, *they* realized it." The man grinned. "I'll be paying those loans off for a long time."

“That sucks.”

“Tell me about it,” Chem said. “So, you moved here just to adjunct a history class or two?”

Elijah stiffened. “Actually, I probably shouldn’t even be teaching. It drives me crazy. But I thought I was going to need the money. I took a research job for a local company—you know, telling their story and all that shit.”

“Everybody’s got a story,” Chem said. “So, what’s theirs?”

Elijah wrung his hands. “Well, uh, I’ve got a nondisclosure agreement.”

“Say no more. Hell, in chemistry, you can’t take a dump without signing an NDA.”

Elijah stood. “Chem, nice to meet you. Time for me to hit the archives. I hope we run into each other.”

“Not like you ran into her, I hope. And if you do, don’t ask me about Zumba.”

Elijah smiled and hovered for a moment.

The man pulled a card out of his pocket and offered it to Elijah. “I’ve been to new cities enough to realize it’s good to have somebody to call.”

Elijah gave him a nod. “Yeah. I’ve done this too many times.”

The historian pocketed the card and exited the coffee shop. Alarawn’s history, and his future, called to him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



ELIJAH LEANED AGAINST the cold brick wall in front of the Hillman Library. He faded into a lineup of other bundled-up, anonymous souls and watched as pedestrians scrambled down the concrete pathway, desperate to escape the cruelty of the Western Pennsylvanian winter. He eyed up each one, cataloging them into some kind of imaginary social taxonomy and wondering about their stories. Perhaps studying history made him more attentive to his surroundings, or maybe he was just a curious person by nature. He couldn't be sure which came first.

Nevertheless, in times like these, he took in everything. He hadn't been in Pittsburgh long, but people had already started to look familiar. Not unlike bars or restaurants, sidewalks and street corners had their regulars. Among the hipsters, nerds, and hippies, Elijah spotted the woman from the coffee shop. His first reaction was to hide behind the wind guard of the bus stop. But before he could, she spotted him. Her eyes narrowed—or at least they did in his imagination.

He bolstered his courage and gave it another shot. He didn't like where he had left things.

"You again?" he said with a grin.

"Me again?" she asked, raising her brow.

"I just wanted to apologize. Sorry about what I said earlier. At the coffee shop."

Her face lost all expression. "Coffee shop?" She cocked her head to the side. "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

Elijah considered jumping in front of the oncoming 61A. Academic hubris makes faculty see themselves as utterly unforgettable. "Oh, right. Earlier? Kiva Han. I made an ass of myself."

The woman's expression broke; something between a giggle and laugh emerged. "I'm sorry. That was cruel. Of course, I remember. I know it's probably surprising, but it's not every day that I run into a talking ass in tweed."

"And she has a sense of humor too," Elijah said, as her laughter subsided. "And come on, the university is *full* of asses in tweed."

"Point taken."

“Let’s try this again,” he said. “I’m Elijah. Elijah Branton.”

“Much better. And I’m Willa Weil. Postmodern poetry and contemporary women’s fiction.”

Elijah cocked his head to the side.

“We’re supposed to share our CVs whenever possible, right?” she answered.

He laughed. “Sorry. Next time I’ll lead with my LinkedIn profile. I’m—”

She put her hand up. “Wait. Let me guess. You are...Economics.” She looked him up and down. “No. You’re far too practical to be an Economics prof. Business Administration, with a concentration in ‘Leadership.’” She made air quotes. “Whatever that means.”

“Ouch. And she twists the knife.” They both laughed.

“So?”

“History,” he said. “Late-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, with a concentration in industrialization in the Rust Belt, particularly during the—”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.” She cut him off. “Slow it down, tiger. You didn’t even buy me dinner yet. Don’t give your whole resume in the first conversation. Were you going to list your recent publications next?” Her eyes smiled. “There are rules, you know.”

She crossed her arms over her dark peacoat.

“I can only assume that you’re tenured, maybe tenure-track,” Elijah said.

“Nope. Proud adjunct, going on half a decade. And I don’t mean to change that either. I’d rather spend my time in the classroom than on committees.”

“A true believer?” he asked. “I am surprised.”

“Well, someone around here has to care about the hearts and minds of the next generation. Otherwise, this world will fall apart. And if you’ve got the passion for it...”

Elijah searched her face for a joke, but it was sincere. Suddenly he felt guilty about the crap lecture he’d just given.

“Yeah,” he said. “Good for you. Seems the fire burned out for me a few years ago. I mean, they’re more interested in their phones than anything I have to tell them.”

Her mouth turned up in a half smile. “Come on... Don’t you remember being twenty? I mean, sure it’s when I truly fell in love with verse, but the gen eds were—”

“—terrible.” Elijah grinned as he finished her thought. “I know, I know. But—”

“But history is different, right?” She patted his arm as if consoling a child. “We *all* think that, Dr. Braxton.”

“It’s Branton.”

Willa winked. "I know."

Elijah's heart sank a little as he watched Rex pulled up in a tinted Lincoln Town Car. He rarely got along so well with colleagues.

"That's me," he said, nodding at the car.

"Wow. The adjunct life has been good to you? If I didn't know better, I'd guess you're upper-level administration."

"I struck it big in Internet marketing before going to grad school. You know—dot-com shit."

She finally laughed with him, not at him.

As he opened the door, he looked back over his shoulder. "See you around the battlefield. And sorry again about the coffee."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "A little burn never hurt anybody."

CHAPTER TWELVE



“MAKING FRIENDS, ARE we?” Rex asked without turning his head. He stared out the window at Willa.

“Even a man of history knows that networking is the way of the future,” Elijah said. “I can’t live entirely in the past.”

When he first met Mr. Bertoldo, Elijah was far too focused on Brooke to really make much of him. Riding beside him gave the historian another opportunity to size him up, and there was a lot of him to size. Rex was tall and shockingly broad. Even in the luxury vehicle, he seemed to barely fit. While his designer suit hid the monster’s true build, judging solely by the thickness of his neck, Elijah could see he was no weakling. Brooke had called him her assistant, but Elijah assumed he was her muscle.

I doubt he’d even fit in my Subaru.

Sitting next to him prompted Elijah to consider his own physique. In high school, he had been painfully thin—a source of great embarrassment. School was designed for people built like Rex, not 130-pound pushovers. Subconsciously, Elijah still saw himself that way, although a decade of bad habits and sedentary living had increased his weight by at least fifty pounds. Those fifty certainly weren’t solid, and Elijah remained intimidated by those who looked like his driver.

They drove mostly in silence, the local sports talk station filling the car. Elijah barely understood the rapid descriptions of games, players, and statistics. Sports weren’t really his thing. A call-in segment started, which only increased his confusion. Ninety percent of the calls were lamenting the Steelers getting knocked out of the playoffs—nearly three weeks prior.

A mix of Monday morning quarterbacking and Pittsburgh therapy session, the show almost amused him. Elijah always thought the Boston accent couldn’t be beaten, until an enthusiastic caller yelled into the phone. “*Yinz guys know the deal. In a play like that, you gotta throw dahntahn. What was that jag off thinkin’? Eh, at least we got the Buccos, am I right?*”

They drove south, putting distance between themselves and the universities of Oakland. Crossing the Monongahela River, they entered

Homestead. Once a thriving industrial area, the town survived as a shadow of its former glory. Rows of houses, previously supported by the steel empires of the twentieth century, now lay empty.

Pittsburgh was a city of ruins.

For a historian, the tangible presence of a distant past proved irresistible. Elijah loved books—they provided a window into another world. Books *and* industrial ruins provided a doorway.

Rex cursed at the radio, interrupting Elijah's reverie.

The bald man gripped the wheel tighter, his jaw clenched. "What do they expect? A ring every season? Damn babies running to mama every time a call don't go their way."

"That's why I don't really get into sports," Elijah said with as much disdain as he could manage. "It breeds childishness."

Elijah looked at his driver, hoping he'd understood his joke. Rex returned the stare with eyes of ice, lips curled into a sneer. Elijah swallowed hard and quickly turned away. The man snickered and turned up the radio.

Moving out of a residential district, Rex piloted them into an open, almost rural space. As steel moved out, trees and wildlife had pushed back in. The twentieth century was undeniably man's century, but in the twenty-first—at least on this plot of dirt—nature was making a comeback. The verdant land could almost be described as lovely if it weren't for the rusted heap of blight that rose up in the middle of it.

They pulled onto a gravel road leading to the plant. The Alarawn mill was a behemoth—a long brick warehouse coupled with huge metal towers sticking out of one end. With its strange industrial fixtures, it looked like an alien ship had crashed nose first into the side of the building. The plant stood imposing, as it had for over a century.

Elijah tried to imagine flames shooting out of the building's flare stack, the dark billowing smoke that covered the city for miles around in a thin layer of soot and ash. This plant alone would have employed several thousand people, working 24/7 to belch out tons of steel annually.

Elijah decided to leave his bag in the car, opting only to take a notebook and a cheap Bic pen with him. He could take pictures with his phone. He was unsure of the condition of the derelict plant and cursed himself for not being more prepared. Rex reached behind his seat and grabbed a large Maglite. He also produced a set of keys from his coat pocket. "These should open any door you find inside the plant."

"You're...you're not coming with me?" Elijah stuttered.

"That's really more of a job for someone of *your* maturity. I'd probably just get in the way. I'll just sit here and listen to sports stuff." A smirk washed across his face.

Elijah resigned himself to crawling around in the dark alone. As he turned to shut the door, Rex yelled out to him. "Don't forget this." He reached into Elijah's bag and pulled out the strange Alarawn medallion. Throwing it to Elijah, he said, "You'd better not lose it, or I'll have your ass."

The historian took it, running his thumb over the engravings. Considering Rex's warning, he decided to put the amulet around his neck for safekeeping. With the muffled sound of talk radio playing behind him, he bolstered his courage and entered the building.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



COLD DEAD AIR SURROUNDED Elijah as he stepped through the doorway. It was hard for him to imagine that once upon a time this place would have been sweltering, the heat of the furnaces baking the bodies of its workers. Large holes in the ceiling provided some illumination, keeping the bowels of the mill out of total darkness. Elijah was still thankful for the flashlight. Industrial ruins danced as the powerful beam swept around the space.

Monstrous machines littered the room—giant blast furnaces, rollers used to shape the hot metal ingots into sheets and rails, and large chains with hooks hanging overhead. This place had horror film written all over it. In its prime, hearing anything over the tremendous din that these machines produced would have been impossible. Now, Elijah could almost taste the silence.

He didn't expect to find much of value here, but he liked to get into the mind, so to speak, of the places he was researching. Not every answer could be found in the library.

He walked carefully through the plant, avoiding the rusted metal traps in his path. Bypassing the administrative offices—they would have been cleared out decades ago—he moved deeper into the heart of the old building, toward the open-hearth furnaces.

He couldn't quite name it, but something pulled him in that direction.

The furnaces were what made this factory unique. They were way better than the older models that came before and helped push Pittsburgh to dominance for most of the century. They were also the source of a lot of conflict between the owners and the labor. More efficient furnaces meant less need for workers. Even though Elijah was mostly hired to talk about the positives of AI's history in the city, he knew their fights with labor were far from honorable. And far from bloodless.

Making history is a violent endeavor.

Walking toward the oldest corner of the building, he found several large pieces of equipment blocking his path. A steel walkway led over the top of the obstruction. Following his light, Elijah backtracked a hundred feet until he found a stairway leading to the platform. He

grabbed the railing and shook it violently. Seeing that it passed his test, he took several tentative steps upwards.

From above, he had a better view of the factory floor. Elijah imagined himself as a pit boss, overseeing the hundreds of men working below.

He passed over the blockage and entered the deeper parts of the mill. A strange warmth grew around him. At first, he chalked it up to the physical effort, but after moving another hundred feet, the change in temperature was undeniable. Beads of sweat ran down his spine underneath his peacoat. Elijah reached into his pocket, his fingers traced the lines of the medallion. It was warm to the touch, hot even.

Just as he reached to remove his coat, something on the ground caught his eye. A slight glow emanated from one of the steel furnaces.

That can't be right. These fires have been cold for decades.

Trying to get a closer look, he leaned over the railing.

Years of corrosion had set their trap. The bar snapped, catapulting his body over the edge.

Flailing, Elijah managed to grasp part of the railing. Pitted steel bit at his palm. His flashlight escaped him, and he hung, dangling in the darkness. He groped for the railing with his other hand but grabbed nothing but empty space.

A panicked scream echoed around the empty cavern, but the call came back empty.

Hopeless.

His chest burned.

The acrid smell of roasting flesh assaulted his nostrils. Elijah looked down. A large cauldron brimming with molten steel sat beneath him.

That can't be. The words rushed through his mind.

Desperately, he tried again to lift his free hand upward. Straining with the last of his strength, his fingers reached towards the metal bar. His hand moved toward the rail.

He was almost there.

Then suddenly he wasn't alone. A man stood above him on the platform wearing a black ski mask. He looked down at Elijah, a cruel smile stuck out from the fabric's opening, clear in the darkness.

"Help me," Elijah said.

"I am," the man replied. Then he kicked the metal bar.

Part of the railing, rusted from exposure, came undone. The sudden jerk was too much. Elijah's hand slipped from its tentative hold.

He fell.

Time stood still.

The man's face, distorted by the mask laughed at him, watching

Elijah as he floated through a sea of nothing toward the bubbling pool of hell.

Elijah screamed until his screams were swallowed by the heat below.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



RANA TE LJUTA ZAPALA...

Wait.

Where am I? It has been so long in that place—away. Darkness. Death? Am I on the other side? The light came, and I was gone. I saw heaven, must have been heaven—I am...was a good man. But there wasn't joy, but pain.

And heat.

Much heat.

Not heaven, but hell. Fire and heat came from above. It took me away from there, from her. Oh, Adrijana. But where is she now? And where am I?

The mill. I remember. I remember what they did to me. What he did to me.

This pain is too great. Everything is fire.

Where are they? They were here moments ago. Before the burning, everything burning.

These hands worked, bled, for the good of the men, for the good of the city. I am zduhać.

No, not anymore. These are not my hands, what is this? Are these the hands of the redeemed?

They burn like the damned.

If I am still on Earth, then he must be here.

He who turned me into this, this monster.

I will find him.

I will kill him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“IT’S TOO DAMN COLD for a drum circle,” King grumbled.

Every Thursday night, he showed up on the Cathedral of Learning lawn. The draw was mostly the coeds—he had a thing for these new hippies and the joints they passed between them. The college kids could afford good weed, and he didn’t mind partaking. Students rotated every four years. There were always new faces. King was the constant. He’d been hanging out in the circles since before Al Gore allegedly invented the Internet.

That night, King wasn’t feeling it. He shook some hands, bumped a fist or two, and strode off toward Forbes Avenue. Drunks would soon be shifting from bar to bar. A perfect time for King to make friends and maybe some money. Oakland, his home since birth, was his throne.

He jammed his tingling hands into wool-lined pockets. If nothing else, a guy from Pittsburgh needed a warm outer layer.

King’s coat couldn’t be too nice. The streetwalker was “residentially ambiguous”—as he needed to be. Most of the Oakland community assumed he was homeless—which he wasn’t—and jobless—which was most often true. Likable and perceptibly homeless was a great combination for making money on the streets. And his was a generous city.

“Hey, King, what’s up, man?”

He threw his right arm in the air as the car shot past. King was an Oakland staple. Over his twenty-eight years of walking the streets, King had seen his share of the bizarre: political protests, streakers, creative public urination, and plenty of drunken fistfights.

Nothing could surprise him.

Until tonight.

King nodded at a group of under-aged frat guys as they staggered toward the next bar. He was pretty sure he heard a racial slur garbled in his direction. Not uncommon. Fast on their heels was a group of women—one wearing a tiara—the others singing “Going to the Chapel.” The one near the back gave a catcall. King couldn’t help but smile.

“Right back at you, baby,” he shouted.

This was life in a college town, and life was good.



His Casio told him it was still an hour and change until last call at Gene's Place. Gene's was King's kind of dive bar. Unlike the college bars on the main drag, Gene's drew the neighborhood folk, those who had not yet been driven out by rising rents or bought out by land-hungry universities. The establishment was tight, smoky, and made of steel town charm. If Pete was on the bar, King knew he could score a shot and a beer to sustain his waning buzz.

Dodging the light traffic, he crossed Forbes and made his way down Atwood. The further from the campus, the more authentic things became. Gene's Place was as real as it got.

The smell of greasy smoke and the vibration of roots rock seeped into the night air. King gave the jolly German character on the sign a nod as he pulled his last Lucky from a crumpled soft pack. Just as he reached for the door, a rumble and crash echoed through the alley. King turned toward the commotion.

Thirty feet down York, a dumpster spun on its side like a giant toy top. Beyond the screeching mass, King saw a figure. It was like a man, but two feet taller and twice as wide. The monstrosity cut through a tight row of houses in the direction of the park.

"The hell?" King uttered.

With the balls of his palms pressed against his eyes, he wondered if the free weed was laced with something funky. His footsteps echoed through the now-empty alley as he walked toward the crash. The feel of steel confirmed that the dumpster was not a figment of his drug-altered mind. One side of it was scorched, warped, and hot to the touch.

Stepping between the houses, King found the creature's escape route. Dark marks scarred the brick home on the right. Melted vinyl siding dripped to the concrete on his left. The chain-link enclosure at the end of the walk had been obliterated. King approached it, the smell of burning metal in his nose. He reached out his hand and touched the fence's remains with two fingers.

Pain split his brain. He pulled his hand back. "Shit."

Black char marks led toward the back of the properties and up over a brick wall.

Nursing his burnt fingers, he walked back toward the bar.

Definitely need that shot and a beer.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THE BACK ALLEY WAS desolate, as back alleys tend to be. Though he could hear noise coming from the houses on either side, Chem felt alone. The first few times he had walked this path, he was anxious and uncertain. Practice and repetition numbed his fear. His stride now confident, he remained alert.

Homestead had a reputation for its less favorable inhabitants. He knew that it was largely undeserved. Like most neighborhoods in the city, the town was relatively safe. The narrow, abandoned buildings could terrify a tourist trying to get to Kennywood—Pittsburgh's riverside amusement park—but unless you were looking for trouble most of the neighborhood was peaceful. But looking for trouble was Chem's job.

Initially, doing business with local dealers turned his stomach and pulled at his conscience. Gang life, the way most might imagine it, was not quite as extensive in Pittsburgh. But drugs and poverty encouraged a certain level of violence. Those who operated within that sphere needed a man with Chem's skill sets. There were fewer med school dropouts than one would imagine, and even fewer who were willing to cross the lines that Chem would leap across with abandon.

But he needed the cash.

After all, scientific advancement trumped the moral ambiguities of his back-alley business. Lesser evils for the greater good had to count for virtue in the great cosmic economy, or at least that's what he told himself. And when it came down to it, no matter their trade, the dealers and thugs were still human, which, in Chem's eyes, maintained some kind of inherent worth. Some kind of dignity.

He hated taking time away from the lab, but research was at a standstill, and his run-in with security meant that he had to find alternative sources for his chemicals—not a cheap endeavor.

Certain that he was on the right track with his new work with Baclofen, he still couldn't manipulate it appropriately in the human blood cultures that he used to test it. Too small of a dosage was ineffective. But too much and the drug caused lethargy and depression—precisely the opposite of the intended results. Not to mention, a

severe overdose would lead to a mental breakdown or death. Humans were just too weak to be strong.

He needed the drug to work. The Vida Serum needed it. And he couldn't risk error.

Turning a corner, Chem found the dimly lit building. The crumbling stoop sagged beneath his feet. The brick house resembled most others in the neighborhood—run down and nearly condemned. A spare piece of two-by-four supported the gutter, plywood covered a front window. Absentee landlords only cared that their tenements were filled and rent checks came in—most months. Home maintenance didn't chart high on the priority list for a slumlord living in Florida.

Chem tried the door. More often than not, they preferred he just walk in. His heart would always pause as he pushed against the knob. But it didn't budge. Knocking, he waited for an answer.

Something big must be going down.

The door cracked open, only as far as the security chain would allow.

The first few house calls had terrified the scientist. Thoughts of botching a surgery surrounded by armed thugs would intimidate the most experienced doctor. And Chem was far from the most experienced. Hell, he was officially not a doctor. But these guys didn't ask to see his credentials. The work was straight forward. Gunshot wounds were generally routine: numb them, pull the slug, stitch the wound, and clean that bad boy up.

Easy money.

"What d'you want?" A husky voice bellowed.

"I'm the doctor." He held up his bag as identification.

The door slammed in Chem's face. The sliding of metal on metal bled through the cheap hollow wood.

He stepped across the threshold onto a small landing filled with variously sized shoes pointing in every direction. The thought of children living amid such violence and squalor was nauseating, though Chem recognized the hypocrisy in his judgment. His own parents had worked hard to provide him with the resources necessary to live a socially upstanding life—a life he threw away when he began his less than legal experiments.

Everyone had choices to make—not everyone was given the same options. Whatever differences existed between Chem and these people, their choices had brought them to the same house that night.

"Thanks for coming." The man's eyes were filled with concern.

"It's my job," Chem said. "Where is he?"

The man nodded down a hall lined with closed doors. Chem preferred to stay in the open. Back bedrooms hid surprises and,

though scrappy, he wasn't much of a fighter. Once, someone jumped him for a bottle of pain pills, and he barely made it out in one piece. But that was near the beginning of his "career." Now he could trust in his reputation. Someone with his talent and ethical nuance was a rare commodity, and whatever else they were, most drug dealers weren't stupid. They were rational enough not to ruin that relationship.

He passed through the living room. Bodies sprawled—filling couches and nearly every inch of the floor. They were frozen in time.

Damn drugs.

Although Chem experienced the same scene several times a month, it still unnerved him. His host—an enormous man in a bloody tank and drooping jeans—led him to a back bedroom.

Through the open door, Chem saw a man clutching his right arm. A red handkerchief served as a half-assed tourniquet. The patient was propped up on a pile of pillows, resting on a sofa—a familiar grimace on his face. A toddler, no more than three, slept soundly against his chest. This scene never made it onto television. Chem approached, slowly. He'd been doing this long enough to expect the worst.

Wounded men were unpredictable.

"What happened?" he asked. But the bloody man was unresponsive. He stared up at the ceiling, a wild look in his eyes.

Shock.

Looking more closely at his patient, Chem noticed his shoulder. It was black and crusted over. Even someone without medical training could assess that the burn was bad.

Chem picked up the child and settled him in a faded recliner on the other side of the room. Returning to his patient, he cut away what was left of the man's shirt.

A hand shot up and grabbed Chem by the collar. Startled, he dropped his scissors.

"It attacked me."

Chem took hold of the man's arm and replaced it by his side. His eyes looked through the Chem to some unknown horror beyond.

"It's okay, man. I'm here to help you. How did you get these burns?"

The man nodded and bit his lip. "That thing. It was huge..."

Chem's body relaxed. Experience told him that he would be fine.

He's hallucinating. Probably self-medicated before I arrived.

But his patient returned to his comatose state, unable to answer any more questions. Chem took a moment to inspect the burn. There was a first time for everything, and Chem wondered how the man came by it. Whatever did this, it was hot as hell.

The failed med student pulled a needle out of his bag and carefully drew fluid from a vial. Seldom satisfied with off-the-shelf solutions,

Chem had created the pain reliever himself, and it packed one hell of a punch. A single milliliter would do the trick for his patient. At full strength, the juice would serve as a powerful tranquilizer, able to drop angry moose. Morphine would take eight times the dosage to do the job. He flicked it with his middle finger, watching the beads fly off the tip.

“This will numb you up pretty well. It will help with the pain.”

The man remained passive as he received the shot. Chem wasn't proud of his source of income, but it made possible his research, which would change the world. And if it weren't for him, this man's wound would surely get infected, and he'd probably not make it. Didn't he deserve help? Chem could never tell if he believed that or if the justification made it easier.

Fifteen minutes later he left the broken-down house with fifteen Benjamins in his pocket.

Easy money.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



WILLA SAT IN A CUBICLE in the sardine-can office as far from her colleagues as possible. Despite how essential part-time professors were to the university, they were easy to come by and therefore given the lowest possible pay. Working conditions weren't exactly glamorous. Privacy was impossible. It wasn't that she didn't like her fellow adjuncts, but the claustrophobic environment made grading nearly impossible, and their banter served as a constant distraction.

Not that she wasn't already distracted. Her grandfather's words burned in her mind. And the words she had hurled back. They were true—and a long time coming. But that didn't make them any less spiteful.

She shook her head and turned up the music.

Bose headphones swallowed her ears. She couldn't listen to anything with lyrics, not while she was grading. Reznor's score for "The Social Network" provided the day's soundtrack. Its driving bars muffled the other worker bees and gave a certain rhythm to her production.

She moved her green pen with diligence and grace over a paper that had likely been written after a six-pack with some cheap action flick on in the background. Her students' level of effort rarely impressed her, but it never affected her own. The work still required care. The poetry demanded it. And despite the crowded office and the unenthusiastic students, Willa remained pleased to be a part of this life. Her calling was a joy.

But a joy that was lessened of late. There was no paper from Sean in this stack.

Local police couldn't find any evidence and were working under the assumption that the kid had left town under his own volition. The University made a note of his absence but did nothing else. Students come and go all the time.

No one cared that Sean was missing. No one but her. And there was nothing she could do about it.

The thought of her student in trouble gnawed at her mind—relentlessly—like a stone caught in a boot during a hike. No matter what she tried, she couldn't put off the feeling that something terrible

had happened to him. Something to do with the man in the mask.

Willa sighed. She'd been staring at the same crappy essay for ten minutes and had gotten nowhere. Time to call it a night.

She packed her papers into her backpack, nodded to the other teachers, and left the office.

Cold air greeted her as she exited through the back. It was later than she thought. Time tended to lose her when she graded.

She looked over the municipal parking lot and a small urban park. Most nights she would take the bus home, but it was Thursday. The buses would be packed with drunken, obnoxious twenty-somethings. Pulling out her phone, she tapped the Uber app. A small price to pay for peace of mind. Cars littered the interactive map—they always did on a weekend night in Oakland.

She decided to head toward the edge of campus to request a ride. A short cut down a small access road between two of the buildings would get her there in no time. Steam from the building's ancient heating system filled the alleyway.

The night was quiet until something between a growl and shriek called out in the distance.

Willa scanned the edges of the alley, where the light faded into darkness. There was no one. No one but her, and whatever made that sound. It came from the end of the path. Willa squinted into the night.

She felt the power before she saw it.

A bright, red presence stumbled around the corner. She could hear it moving, like it was dragging itself along the pavement. And whatever it was, it wasn't human.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



WILLA GASPED AS THE creature emerged. It looked like the bastard son of a comic book villain and some kind of apocalyptic demon. Its enormous body was dark black, yet it glowed as if it was burning on the inside—as if Hades was trying to escape from the cracks in its skin. Willa could see smoke coming off its back. The creature's strides were long but uneven—almost drunken. It lurched forward, leaving burning red embers in its wake.

Then, the monster stopped. Its head, pulsing lava, turned toward the professor. Their eyes locked.

Willa stared into the depths of hell.

The creature was grotesque. Shaped like a man, its form shifted oddly, almost fluidly. Its viscosity reminded Willa of a snowman melting during a warm February afternoon, features slowly distorted by the sun. A creation of Dante's come to life. Whether it was the tortured or the torturer, she couldn't tell.

Willa tried to find a poem, but nothing came to her.

The beast staggered toward her, thirty feet and closing fast. Edwin's words echoed in her mind, her years of training screaming at her to take action. Her mind froze, but she let her body take over.

The words came on their own as she pushed one hand forward.

"The dragon that laid waste the land

Has fallen beneath my conquering hand."

A silver light, like a spear, burst from her palm and shattered against the creature's chest. The force of her spell stunned it, but only for a moment. Her voice grew louder, and she planted her feet and tried again. But still, the thing moved closer.

Her spell affected it, but not enough. It was almost as if the words bounced off its molten skin.

The cold January air was getting warmer. The monster was a ball of energy. Sweat rolled down Willa's neck. Unsure of what to do, Willa decided on a tactical retreat. She ran back down the alley as fast as her legs could take her.

The creature roared, the depth in its voice rumbling through her. She sprinted harder.

As she reached the edge of the alley, she turned back to see the

monster gaining on her. It drew her focus, and she didn't see the metal valve sticking out.

It clanged off her leg and she skidded to a stop as she tumbled into a parking lot.

Her palms were bleeding, but she couldn't feel the pain. Her attention was reserved for the monster. She rolled over and pushed herself back, away from it.

But on it came.

As it stepped closer, she could see a symbol burning through the charred skin on its chest. Despite the fact that death was upon her, she couldn't help but stare. Curved lines intersected an inverted square, like a diamond wreathed in flame.

The symbol was beautiful. A taste of delight before her certain ruin.

The burning hulk raised its arms to crush her, but Willa wasn't done yet. She spat out words that she had just used against her grandfather. Her spell came to life.

The thing's arms crashed against an invisible shield. It staggered back confused. Willa could feel the force of its blow rattle her bones. Her words broke and with them the shield.

Not even her grandfather's magic had done that.

The monster bore down on her, heat rolling off of it. And just as she felt she would burn up into nothing, the screeching of tires on asphalt cut through the night air. Willa and the beast looked up in tandem as a jet-black sedan hopped the curb and spun into a slide worthy of a B-grade cop film.

Willa shot to her feet and dodged left, just barely out of the vehicle's trajectory. The monster was not so agile. With the sound of erupting steel, the car crashed into the giant. Its dark frame came to a halt as if it hit a concrete barrier. The tires on the far side lifted into the air and then dropped.

An impact like this would have tossed a human twenty yards. It barely knocked the molten thing over. As the monster hit the ground, Willa watched its surface move. Little waves rippled across its charred body before settling.

The creature lay motionless.

She took a step toward it but stopped when the driver's door opened. A man built like a powerlifter in a perfect black suit casually stepped out of the car.

It was *him*. Black ski mask and all. At the moment, he was a nightmare worse than the demon who had almost just killed her.

Willa struggled to get out another spell, but he was already on her. His fist slammed into her stomach like a brick. She fell to the ground.

Dark eyes stared at her for a moment from under the mask. "Not

yet, Professor.” He grunted before turning toward the monster.

But it was a monster no longer.

The glow from within the thing had diminished. Molten steel pooled on the ground, and Willa could barely see the naked figure of a man. The brute bent down and touched the man’s forehead.

He nodded, then popped the trunk of the Town Car and lifted the unconscious man like a sack of potatoes. Placing him in the trunk, the suit got in his car and sped away.

Willa stared as the monster and the masked man disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



VINCE CHARLES'S LARGE glasses and slight frame made him look like an insecure middle-schooler, despite the fact that he was a multi-millionaire nearing sixty. Brooke and the aging businessman weren't exactly close, but he had been her father's best friend and the closest thing she had to an ally on AI's executive board.

And she needed allies now more than ever.

They met at noon at Primanti Brothers, a bustling sandwich shop in the city's strip district. Primanti's wasn't a typical meeting place for people of their means, but Brooke was far from typical. While their lunch wasn't exactly "off the books," she had no desire to advertise her movements to Van Pelt and the others. The crowd provided the perfect cover.

"I don't know what to tell you, Brooke. I don't see much of a choice." He kept his head down, distracting himself by picking french fries off his sandwich.

"How can selling the company be a choice at all? You know what this industry means to the city. How can we just strip it for parts and leave it to die?" she asked.

"Pittsburgh isn't the place it once was. It has other industry. Healthcare, technology, education, and even art are more Pittsburgh than steel is now. Maybe closing up shop is the best move." He looked up, his eyes offering something of an apology.

Brooke sat, considering her next words. She had eight months to turn the company around, and she couldn't afford to alienate the few friends she had.

"Vince, you knew my father, knew how much he cared for this place. We can find a way to make this work, we have to."

The man pushed aside the sandwich. He reached across the table and placed a hand on hers.

"You know you have my support. If anyone can find a way to right this ship, it's you. Who knows, maybe your Project Cold Steel will work. Convince the city to ease off some regulations. Sign an exclusive contract with us. Those are big ifs. And I want you to understand that your father wouldn't have wanted you to ruin yourself fighting a losing battle. You can be free to be your own person. There's a lot of

world out there.”

Brooke smiled at her father’s friend and nodded in agreement. But truthfully, she couldn’t have disagreed more. For better or worse she was bound to this place.

“Just promise me that when Project Cold Steel is a success, you’ll have my back with Van Pelt.”

Vince smiled. “I’ll always have your back, Brooke. For your father’s sake. But don’t drag your heels. We don’t have much time, and Van Pelt is sharpening his knives.”

She nodded, thinking about the historian currently in her employ. He was supposed to send a report in by this morning, but it never arrived.

“I’ve got my best people working on it as we speak,” she said and hoped it wasn’t a lie.



Brooke sat in the back seat as Rex Bertoldo pulled away from the restaurant. She could do without most of the luxuries wealth afforded but having a driver 24-7 was an extravagance she truly loved. One time, she sat in the front passenger side, but it felt odd. Rex actually talked more when she was in the back. The man had been with the Alarawn family for as long as she remembered. It was as if he was family.

“So, what did he find?” Brooke asked.

Rex glanced into the rear-view mirror and caught Brooke’s eye. He quickly looked away. The mountain of a man turned down sports talk radio.

“Excuse me, Ms. Alarawn?”

She knew he had heard her. “I was just asking about Dr. Branton. What happened at the mill?”

Rex kept his eyes trained on the road, hands at ten and two. He was all business, especially when the boss was riding along. “Not really sure. He told me he’d feel better going in alone. I offered a few times to assist him, but the man was adamant.”

Brooke could see Rex’s jaw clench. Something was off. “Okay,” Brooke said. “But, what about when he got back to the car? Certainly, the two of you talked.”

Rex ran a big beefy hand over his bald head. “Not so much. I mean, he said it was pretty amazing, not what he expected. Otherwise, he just sat and jotted notes in his little journal. I figured I should let the man work.”

Rex slowed to a stop on Liberty Avenue. Glancing over his shoulder, he asked, “Did you want me to get some information from him? I thought I was just the driver on this one.” Rex’s voice bordered

on disdain.

The man had worked for Brooke since she had taken over Alarawn Industries. She still wasn't exactly sure how she should treat him, or what his role was. When it came down to it, Rex had five times the experience at AI than she did. Despite his tough guy exterior, she knew he was smart, driven, and shrewd. The fact that he didn't hold a position of greater prominence was odd.

A waste.

He could do so much more. Part of her wondered if he had.

There were rumors from the old days. Company rivals going missing. Failed business deals that turned around when the opposition showed back up with broken limbs and a miraculous change of heart. She wondered if Rex had been a part of their conversion.

She wondered what he would do for her if she asked.

"No, that's all right," Brooke said. "I just thought he would probably talk more—you know—about what he found. I texted him a few times with no response. Like he's avoiding me."

He laughed—which sounded like a foreign language coming from the man. Humor and Rex were like oil and water. "He's a strange one. We don't have much to talk about."

"No. How so?" Brooke asked.

"Probably just the fact that he's an egghead, and I'm a meathead. If you can't talk sports, guns, and women, I'm not much of a conversationalist."

Brooke smiled, knowing full well the truth of that statement. More than once Rex had been the only company she had in her lonely existence. The light turned green, and Rex fell silent as he eased the town car off the line.

She picked up her phone and tried Elijah again. Maybe it was time she found someone new to talk to.

CHAPTER TWENTY



ELIJAH'S EYES CRACKED open and he grabbed the sheets. He was in his room, safe. But his heart still pounded from the nightmare he awoke from. Fire. Pain. A man in a mask. The dream retreated out of sight, but those feelings and images remained. His head pounded. He felt like one of the frat boys in the back row of his class after an all-night bender.

He tried to remember if he had gone out drinking, but he couldn't recall. Couldn't recall anything, in fact, except the factory.

Chills crept over his body. The sheets, tangled in his legs and extended up, over his torso. As he shifted ever so slightly, a searing pain shot through his side and into his shoulder. Gingerly, he reached across his body and pulled the sheet back. His rib cage, where he felt the most acute pain, looked like a work of postmodern art. Splotches of purple in different shades littered his skin. He gently pressed on the darkest area and cringed.

What the hell?

With gritted teeth, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. The pounding in his head matched the throbbing in his side. Elijah rubbed his right shoulder with his left hand. More pain. Pulling the sheet off the rest of his body, he found himself completely naked.

Not his customary nighttime attire.

Blood caked his sheets.

He ran his hand through his hair. It was coarse and sticky. Once he made peace with the pain, as much as he could, Elijah searched his memory.

What happened? Where was I?

He attempted to build an itinerary of the previous day—to reconsider the events. The walk through his morning ritual, the wasted class, and even his conversation with Willa.

I was with Rex. The old mill. And then...

Every nerve in his body screamed as he crossed his bedroom toward the attached bathroom. A foreign image stared back at him from the mirror. The usual circles under his eyes, which accompanied late nights and long study-sessions, were deeper and darker than ever. A three-inch laceration spread from his cheekbone down under his

beard. He patted it with his index and middle fingers, sucking wind at the lightest touch.

Stitches might be in order.

His academic body appeared just a bit less flabby than it had the previous day as if he had taken on a day's worth of a workout regimen. A foreign scar marked the center of his chest. It was scabbed, red, and pus-filled. Elijah squinted, nearly certain he could spot a faint pattern in it.

Turning the shower on full-heat, he stepped off the cold tile floor and into the steaming water. The spray made his torn body sting. Blood, mixed with dirt, made a brackish whirlpool over the drain. He let the water pour over him until he had exhausted the hot-water tank.

Carefully, he eased himself into the loosest-fitting clothes he could find. Agony filled each movement, especially when the shirt touched his chest.

He picked up his phone, ready to call Rex, but thought twice about it. His questions would brand him unstable, and there was no doubt that the henchman returned detailed reports to his boss—Elijah's benefactor. Not wanting to suggest insanity to his new employer, he instead pulled up Brooke's number and noticed four texts from her that he had yet to reply to. He tapped out a message: **Going to spend the day at Hillman. I'll keep you posted.**

If he could keep them at bay for a day or two he could try and figure out what the hell happened, and why he couldn't remember. First, he had to take care of his body. A small stack of business cards had piled up on his makeshift dresser. Conference attendance and new positions always added a few to his collection. Mostly he used them as bookmarks. The things were nearly useless in the age of the Internet. Little paper dinosaurs just waiting for extinction. He could find almost anybody he wanted to online, and they could do the same. But that day the dinosaurs would serve their intended purpose. Sifting through them he found the card of the man from the coffee shop.

Percival Carver Scott, Chemical Research

He tapped the number into his messaging app and stared at the empty text box.

How do you start this text message?

Hey, it's Elijah from the coffee shop. The new guy. Got a minute? I might need your professional opinion on something medically related.

He sent the text and shoved the phone in his pocket. Easing into the rest of his clothes, he grabbed his bag and turned toward the door. The phone buzzed. He pulled it out and saw that it wasn't a text, but a call.

“Shit.” It was Brooke Alarawn.

He thought about ignoring her—blame it on being in the library. But in the first few weeks of his position, he feared disappointing his boss. Elijah tapped the green circle next to Brooke’s name. “Hello?”

“Elijah, it’s Brooke.”

“Hey,” Elijah said, thinking on his feet. “I’m just getting to the library now.”

There was a pause. He had never been much of a liar. “Sounds quiet pretty quiet for the streets of Oakland,” Brooke said.

Elijah wasn’t even sure why he’d decided to lie. “Not really. Must be this new phone.” He considered making more excuses but figured he would quit while he was behind.

“Anyway,” Brooke said, “I was hoping that you would want to get dinner tonight.”

Elijah was speechless.

She continued. “You know, get to know each other a bit more. But most importantly I want to hear about your trip to the mill.”

The hair on Elijah’s neck raised, and he fought down the paranoid thought that she knew something he didn’t. But her tone was warm. She probably just wanted research updates.

The timing couldn’t be worse.

“Sure. Let me check my social calendar.” Elijah paused. “Looks free between now and June. I should be able to work you in.”

Something close to a laugh came across the line. “Great. I’ll have Mr. Bertoldo pick you up at six. Library or your apartment?”

Rex...

The thought of the large man filled Elijah with dread, but he couldn’t tell why.

“Not sure where I’ll be. Tell him I’ll text him around 5:30.”

“Sounds good. See you soon.”

The line went silent. Brooke Alarawn had just asked him to dinner. His life couldn’t get much stranger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



THE BUS RIDE ACROSS town to Oakland was pure hell. Elijah thought the transit was going to shake loose every bone in his body. His Subaru still sat idle in the parking garage of Alarawn Industries. The cost to the company to store it probably outpaced his pay by now. With a decent bus system and Rex at his beck and call, Elijah had decided to save some cash, and stow his ride. As the bus hit a pothole, Elijah cursed his own thrift.

The librarian, usually friendly, gave him a sideways glance as he walked past the front desk. With the scar on his face and a full-body limp, he looked like he'd been hit by a truck. For all Elijah knew, he had been.

He eased his aching frame into the study carrel he frequented. The wooden chair felt harder than usual. A historic archive held his attention as the lone piece of research that day. He grabbed every text he could find relating to Alarawn Industries and the old mill, hoping that on-site pictures might break open his memory loss and help him recall exactly what had happened last night.

If worse came to worst, he would hint around with Rex on the way to dinner. Maybe he could get some information without disclosing too much.

Flipping the pages, Elijah took in pictures of a worker's strike at the old site. Men, with arms draped around one another, glared at the camera. Cigarettes hung from dirty lips. The soot on their faces and the surrounding rubble gave the prints a look more like old war photographs than anything else. In some ways that's exactly what they were.

Photos from a labor war, with more than a few casualties.

Elijah pulled a magnifying glass from his bag. It was a trusty tool of the historian, as archival photos, more often than not, lacked clarity.

Staring into faces from the past, Elijah felt strangely nostalgic. He could hear the sounds of the mill, feel the heat coming off the furnace, and taste the carbon soot in his mouth. He felt a kinship with the workers. While his research failed to knock loose any of the previous night's details, it did fill him with emotions unfamiliar to him—

homesickness and loss.

That's when he noticed the medallion hanging around the neck of one of the men.

My friends, a soft voice whispered behind him.

Elijah jumped at the sound and turned around, but there was no one there.

"Keep it together man," Elijah said to himself and turned back to the book. But still, the thought was strange. Why was this random steelworker wearing the Alarawn medal?

Thirty pages later, he felt anxiousness. His concentration waned, and his fingers fidgeted with the pen. Unusual for a man who spent his nights and days focused on dense reading. After five minutes of scanning pages that his brain didn't absorb, he decided to give himself a break.

Rising from the desk, he remembered just how sore his body was. It had tightened during his time in the study carrel. He worked his way down to the main floor of the library, cringing all the way, and stepped through the front doors.

As usual, a huddled mass of smokers stood twenty feet from the entrance. Elijah always threw a smug, judgmental glance their way. He could think of a thousand more enjoyable ways for a guy to kill himself—nearly all of them cheaper. His first and only experience with tobacco was as an undergrad. It involved way too much cheap whiskey, a cigar, vomit, and endless jokes from his buddies.

He walked past the group, drawing second-hand smoke into his lungs. He didn't experience his usual revulsion, but rather satisfaction—as if a little edge of his anxiety was sanded smooth. He took a step closer, intentionally drawing from their thick clouds.

Three of the four students left the crowd, leaving a girl alone, fishing her second cigarette from the pack.

American Spirits—of course.

The co-ed had dyed black hair, which fell over the shoulders of her thrift store jean jacket. It was covered in patches—but he couldn't tell if they were for bands or anarchist groups. She looked familiar, but he couldn't quite place her. That didn't matter. She had what he needed.

Elijah ambled over, his hands pushed in his pockets. "Can I, um, bum one of those?" That line usually worked in the movies.

The girl looked up. "Oh, hey, Dr. Branton." She paused, waiting for a response. He just stared at her. "It's Julie, from Research Methods."

Elijah's face broke into a grin. Toe to toe with his one of the students in his new class, he said, "Of course. Sorry. You know, out of context and all."

She nodded. "Damn. What happened to your face?"

His eyes kept dropping to the pack of cigarettes. A reasonable lie

would be helpful—but he could barely focus on standing, let alone subterfuge. He shrugged, nonchalantly. “Don’t know.”

The girl’s lips curled into a mischievous grin. “Must have been a crazy night—I’ve had a few of those.”

She pulled a smoke from the hard pack and passed it over. Elijah smelled it, as though it were the last thing on earth. He accepted the lighter. The butt between his lips felt oddly familiar, like he had smoked a pack of cigarette every day. He drew deeply.

Da, *that’s good*.

Elijah turned around at the whisper, but once again, no one was there.

He was going mad, but he fought the urge to run. All he cared about at the moment was drawing in more of the rich tobacco. His body revolted in coughs. Smoke shot from his mouth and nose in an uneven staccato, burning all the way.

“Easy there, Professor,” the student said.

He nodded but kept quiet.

“I have been meaning to tell you,” she said, pausing to draw on her cigarette, “your lecture that opened the semester was actually pretty interesting. Jimmy, one of those guys in the back, talked about how terrible you were. But he’s a douche. Everyone knows it.”

“Thanks, Jen.”

“Julie.”

“What?” the professor asked, paying far more attention to the nicotine coursing through his veins.

“My name. It’s Julie.”

“Oh, right, sorry.”

The phone in his pocket buzzed. Elijah pulled it out and unlocked the screen. **Chem.**

“I’m sorry...”

“Julie.” She smiled.

“Right. I need to take care of this.” He motioned to his phone. “I’ll see you in class.”

“No problem. And take care of your face. You should rub some vitamin E on that thing, it will help it not to scar. Not to mention you could...”

Julie continued talking at the empty space that Elijah left behind him.

Yeah. No problem. I was just taking care of some things. Let me know what you need.

Great, he typed with his left hand, his right hanging limply at his side. **You know, with the adjunct health benefits.**

He drew on the cigarette, smoking it down to the filter. Tapping his foot, he waited for a response. The sun sank over the tree line to

the southwest; he'd have just enough time to make it over to the failed doctor before needing to text Rex for a ride.

I'm at the lab. Just give me a buzz when you get here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“DAY-UM, MAN.”

“You should see the other guy,” Elijah said, contorting his body to remove his shirt with as little pain as possible. The pain kept him from drawing in his stomach—as was his custom since grad school.

“Looks to me like you *are* the other guy.” Chem pulled a pair of gloves out of an open doctor’s bag balanced on a lab stool. “You’re not allergic to latex, are you?” the chemist asked.

“That’s quite a pickup line,” Elijah said, drawing a laugh from Chem. “You always carry that thing around with you?” Elijah’s eyes cut to the open bag.

“Never know when you need to play Good Samaritan. Though this wasn’t quite what I expected when you said you had a personal problem.”

The historian winced as Chem pressed on his rib.

“Hurts, don’t it?” The man gave a grin as he continued up and down Elijah’s side. “Just one little crunchy spot, right here.”

Something between a scream and a yelp emerged from the patient’s throat. He bit his lip and tried to regain his composure. Chem moved from the rib cage to Elijah’s lacerated cheek.

“Yikes. This thing looks like a cat took a dump in there.”

“Think I need stitches?”

“I think you *needed* stitches,” he said. “After eight hours they’re not much use. Let me clean it up. Then I’m going to have you take these for the pain.” He turned to his medical bag and pulled out a prescription bottle. “You didn’t get these from me, right?”

“Who *are* you? I feel like I’m in a mob movie.”

“Let’s not go overboard. But it was a safe move calling me. I don’t ask as many questions as the hospital.” Chem cleaned the wound and pulled it together with butterfly closures. “These will do just about nothing at this point. Scars kind of make you look badass though.”

“I get that a lot. You have a lot of stuff in that bag, Mary Poppins. You play doctor a lot?”

“Ever since little Susie Swanson in the second grade.” Chem inspected his handiwork. “I have a lot of clumsy friends. How’d this happen, anyway?”

The image of the man in the mask came back to him and with it the feeling of falling.

Elijah shook his head. "You're going to find this hard to believe, but I have no idea. I woke up this way."

"Hard to believe?" Chem asked. "Hell, forgotten battle wounds are an Oakland specialty. I didn't take you as the Jager shots kind of guy."

He reached into his bag and pulled out a needle and an empty vial. "When was your last tetanus shot?"

"Five years ago. But I've been saying that for ten years." Elijah hated needles.

"All right, since you're on the Adjuncts United Health Plan, I'm going to take some blood and run it for you. Let's make sure your cholesterol is good and all that shit."

"You've got some bedside manner."

"Yeah. Shocking they kicked me to the curb, right?"

After watching Chem draw his blood, Elijah wiggled back into his shirt. "Hey, man, thanks. I have a dinner to run to up on Mount Washington. Let's hang out, though—you know, with my shirt on."

"Drop me a text. Nights like yours seem like a wild time. I'll see if I can keep up."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



THE CAT MOVED ITS HEAD from side to side, watching as Willa paced around her apartment like a woman bent on doing something stupid. Which was precisely her situation.

Last night she faced down a monster, some sort of demonic creation ripped from a nightmare. The image of it, smoldering as if it was burning from the inside, wouldn't leave her mind.

She had managed to carry herself home, despite her bruised ankle and rising panic. It wasn't until she was behind her door—with both locks engaged and a chair backing them up—that she let the realization of what just happened to sink in. But once in, the truth of it wouldn't let her be.

She spent a sleepless night imaging her skin melting away.

As morning rose, she had enough presence of mind to email her class—canceling the day's lecture. She could barely sit still, let alone lead a seminar. The only questions she could ask revolved around molten steel and terror.

The Internet provided no answers of worth about the creature she had encountered. Neither did the news. But she knew it was real, could still feel the fear as she laid there, moments away from her death.

The thing almost killed her. It *would* have killed her, if not for the man in the mask.

"Who was he?" she said out loud. Her cat stared at her, but if he had an opinion on the matter, he kept it to himself.

Something strange was going down in Pittsburgh, that was evident.

Despite Edwin's reassurances, Willa couldn't escape the fear that something terrible was about to happen. And there was no one to stop this. Not the cops. Not The Guild.

No one but her.

She thought about going to her grandfather, telling him what she saw. But she'd been down that road before. If she went to him again, there was no telling how he'd respond. He was just as likely to stop her as he was to help.

And Willa couldn't be stopped. Her student had gone missing. The connection between Sean Moretti, the man in the ski mask, and the

burning man of Pittsburgh eluded her. Chalking up the masked brute's presence at both of these moments to a coincidence didn't satisfy her. But for the life of her, Willa couldn't come up with any reasonable explanation.

The mystery man had gotten the drop on her *twice*. She wasn't going to let that happen again.

Suddenly, her path forward became clear.

The cat stared as she grabbed her bag and ran from the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



ELIJAH FELT MORE AT ease than he had since coming to Pittsburgh, but he wasn't sure why.

Brooke Alarawn sat across the table from him in a corner restaurant on Mount Washington. The room—warmly lit by hanging lamps—was small enough to feel homey, but large enough to afford some privacy.

The smells of the Eastern European cuisine wafting through the room were strangely familiar and comforting. He smoothed the tablecloth in front of him with his left hand and looked up at Brooke. Unlike during their previous meetings, she looked like a normal twenty-eight-year-old. She was even more stunning dressed down in jeans and a casual blouse.

Elijah was pleased the table was set for only two. Rex had dropped him at the curb. The drive over from Oakland took some time, which Elijah had hoped would be useful. But his driver said nothing about the day at the mill. As soon as he picked Elijah up at Chem's lab, the taciturn man turned on the radio and addressed only the voices coming in over the air. If he knew anything, he was keeping it to himself.

"Do you know what you're having?" The server looked like a retired KGB agent, dressed up as a waiter.

"Would you order the lady an appetizer?" Brooke asked Elijah.

Elijah scanned the menu; unfamiliar names jumped from the page. But when he ordered the *Pastrmajlija* the words came out as if he were a native speaker.

The waiter raised his eyebrows. "Oh, nearly perfect."

Brooke laughed. "I didn't see that coming. I thought your specialty was twentieth-century American history."

No one was more surprised than Elijah himself. The words came out unbidden as if he was a ventriloquist's dummy. "Yeah," Elijah said, scrambling for words. "I knew a guy in Boston. We went to these places all the time."

His subterfuge was improving.

"You're full of surprises, Dr. Branton." Brooke's eyes smiled in a way he hadn't seen before.

“And, speaking of surprises,” Brooke said, “what in the world happened to your face?”

Elijah’s left hand instinctively came up to his jaw. He had been awake for hours, and yet still no memory of where his injuries came from. He fought to keep the fear at bay and tried his best for a winsome smile. “Absent-minded professor.”

“Occupational hazard? This sounds interesting.”

“Not so much,” Elijah said. “I was walking down Fifth, lost in my thoughts. I was making a few notes on my phone and ran straight into a street sign.” He grinned and looked at the table, hoping she would buy it.

Brooke laughed. “You gotta be kidding me.”

“Nope. Right into it. Consider it a mark of my dedication that I’m willing to sacrifice this pretty face for your job.”

Brooke laughed again. “Quite a sacrifice. I’m starting to think that I’m doing the world a disservice.”

The appetizer came; Elijah’s mouth watered. He wanted to swallow it whole.

“I love finding these neighborhood places,” Brooke said. She scooped some of the bread pie onto a plate and took a bite. “Oh, this is excellent.”

Elijah took his own. “It’s decent; the lamb isn’t quite right.” He surprised himself again.

“You’re a connoisseur?”

“I dabble,” Elijah said. “So, you said we were here to talk shop. What do you want to know?”

“Are all of you academics so straight to the point?”

Elijah laughed. “Getting straight to the point is not a charge often given in the halls of the academy. But...I didn’t know if it was appropriate to pry into my boss’s private life.”

“You can pry a little.” She smiled looked down at the table cloth. Gone was the powerful figure he had met on the top floor of the PPG Tower. Instead, sitting across from him was simply a woman, out for a first meal with a new friend.

“Okay. What was it like going to the great and mighty Yale?” he asked, not especially sure what to just chat about.

“Oh, you know. You went to college.”

Elijah fidgeted with his silverware. “Yeah. Sure. But I’m guessing Yale was a little different than Canton State University. Most of us were just working-class kids. I think their motto was ‘Good Enough to be Considered College.’”

Brooke laughed. It was deep and true, which made Elijah relax. “Maybe. But there’s only one of us at the table who’s a Ph.D.”

He shrugged. “School was the only thing I was ever good at.

Seemed wise to stay the course. But I'm asking the questions here. Yale?"

"It was...refreshing. Growing up in Pittsburgh as an Alarawn, it was like every second was an event. We're celebrities here. When I went to Yale, the pond got a lot bigger. It gave me a chance to just be some kid trying to figure things out."

"Just another multi-million-dollar kid?"

Brooke laughed. "I know, right? But it's *really* like that there. I also had to make friends and achieve things based on my own merit, not on the Alarawn name. College was really good for me."

"Until you needed to come home."

She nodded. "Yeah. The spotlight returned quickly, with my parents' death and taking over the company. And it's been nonstop ever since. Everything moving in nine directions at once. I'd give anything to go back to Yale for a while."

"If you need me to, I could roll out my best boring lecture. I have a ton of them. Guaranteed to make you snooze or your tuition back."

Brooke snorted and covered her mouth, a move which Elijah decided was ridiculously cute. "It might be why I'm glad we're hanging out. You make me feel like, well, just a person. Thanks for that."

"Sure. As long as you keep paying me."

"Way to ruin the mood, Branton," Brooke said.

"It's what I do best."

"Okay, then. Business time. I'm sure you're smart enough to see what AI is up against. Project Cold Steel really is the best chance I have and salvaging this thing. Rex told me about your trip to the old mill. Find anything interesting?"

While the question was inevitable, Elijah still felt unprepared. He had stepped into one of the more difficult conversations of his life. The vague memory of pain was all that was left to him. "Some people say if you've seen one old mill you've seen them all. But they have no idea what they're talking about. It was really interesting, walking the grounds, moving through the building, and picturing the stories that I've been reading about for weeks."

Brooke pushed her dish toward the center of the table. "I've read a lot of those stories. And of course, my dad talked about his grandfather Thomas incessantly. There's a lot of pride for the Alarawn family in that place. In the city, really. That's what this project is about. I need you to reconstruct the narrative, show people all the things my company—my family—has done for the city. And what we will do in the future."

Filthy lies! The voice, drenched in its Eastern European accent, sliced through Elijah's ears. It was louder this time, but Brooke

seemed not to hear it. Elijah fought the urge to turn around, terrified at finding nothing once again.

Silence grew between them, so Brooke carried on. Elijah began to sweat as he listened to her. His face flushed; he wondered if it was the food. Maybe the wounds that littered his body were infected after all. He fought the urge to scratch at the scabs on his chest.

Elijah watched Brooke's lips move, hearing only some of what she was saying. "These days everyone focuses on the negatives: smog, accidents, exploitation, blah, blah, blah. It really is an inaccurate representation of what we've done. And that's why..."

The discomfort transformed into something else—anger. His face turned from warm to red-hot. Beads of sweat rolled down his back. Brooke Alarawn's beauty vanished.

She was grotesque. All he could see was a monster who would kill him and his friends for nothing more than profit.

"...and that's where the name for the project came from. An old family motto: 'The hottest fires forge the coldest steel.' A little hokey, I know, but there's truth in it. Basically, it means that passion is our strength, that you don't get the durability you need to build skyscrapers and bridges—to build a city—without really caring. That's what Project Cold Steel is all about. Showing Pittsburgh how passionately the Alarawns care."

Bastard—gadovi, the voice rang again. *We should kill every last one of them.*

Brooke stopped talking and stared at Elijah, mouth slightly open. "You okay?" she stammered. "Your face, it's...it's changing."

Elijah stood, knocking over the chair behind him. Everyone in the restaurant turned. "I'm sorry, excuse me. I'm...I'm not feeling well."

Stumbling toward the restroom, Elijah felt the pain in his legs increase. His head felt numb—tingling—as if his blood was being drained. The men's room was a tiny square with a single toilet. Thankful for the privacy, he ran cold water into his cupped hands. With his face close to the sink, Elijah splashed water again and again. His eyes were on fire. He opened Chem's "prescription" and swallowed three more pills.

The voice was screaming now. Something about steel and fire and revenge.

"Leave me alone," Elijah shouted, then slammed the wall with his fist. The voice quieted, and with it, the anger that Elijah felt.

He took a deep breath, then another. Looking up into the dirty mirror, he found his face sickly pale, except for the dark circles under his eyes, staring back at him.

After several minutes of deep breathing, Elijah returned to the dining room. Brooke was on her phone as if nothing ever happened.

As soon as she looked up, the feelings returned.

Anger. Pain. Disgust.

Fire.

Elijah gathered a fistful of his khakis and squeezed, but the emotions remained. Three paces from their table, Elijah knew he was going to pass out—or throw up.

His body grew hotter.

As he stood there, failing to make sense of it all, a different phenomenon struck him. Elijah felt his body changing. Pressure built from the inside—as if his blood were trying to escape through his skin.

The pain was staggering.

Brooke stared as well, but her face held a look of concern. The cell phone slipped out of her hands and tumbled to the floor. She paid it no heed. The rest of the crowd carried on as usual as if she and Elijah were invisible.

He looked down at his forearms. His muscles heaved in rhythm with the pounding between his eyes. His flesh rippled.

What was in those drugs? Am I hallucinating? What's happening?

An inclination to scream overwhelmed him.

The room blurred, then went dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



SCHENLEY PARK WAS QUIET, which suited Willa's needs perfectly. Too cold at this time of year for most casual park goers, only the occasional hardcore runner threatened to break her concentration.

She wrapped her peacoat tighter around her tiny frame as her eyes ran across the open text on the grass. Poems, from all ages, ready to be used. All ages except for the present. The Guild's law still held its sway. Just because she was fighting with her grandfather, it didn't mean she couldn't use the Canon.

She just wouldn't be using it the way her grandfather had taught her.

From day one of her training, Edwin stressed defensive magic, encouraging her to hide in the same ways The Guild did. But Willa knew that defense was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to what magic could do. So, over the years, Willa began to gather her own repertoire, combing through the Canon's offerings. The great verses might be old, but with its age the Canon carried multitudes.

None of this was easy. Magic was an art form more than a science, and like all good art, its ways and means were subtle. Apparently, debate still raged in The Guild's ivory tower about how exactly the poem magic worked, and why most couldn't use it at all. But while the theory behind magic was far from agreed upon, the praxis couldn't be clearer.

For those in the line—like Willa—poetry called out in its own voice—a voice that was often unique to each caster. Edwin oversaw her studies, but in the end, when she cast a spell it was an act unique to her and her relationship to the poem. A marriage of sorts, between student and subject. And like a marriage, it took tremendous effort. Not just at the moment itself, although casting a spell was exhausting, but the moments when she wasn't actively using magic was where the power truly came from. It wasn't like she could just read some Shakespeare and pull a rabbit from a hat. She had to find spells that spoke to her—most never did—and she spent hours with those words, running them through her mind, plumbing their hidden depths, welding them to her and her to them. It was more like knowing a friend or lover than knowing a recipe. Her relation to the poem had to

be deep. Personal. Mystical.

Then, and only then would their power reveal themselves.

But sitting on the cold grass, desperation had taken over. She worked quickly. Fudging corners and trying to force a solution. Trying to find the monsters that haunted her dreams. Trying to find the ones who stole her student from her.

Edwin would hate every part of this, a fact that made Willa smile. Although she didn't look it, she wasn't one to shy away from a little rebellion now and then.

She took a breath, started the words, and prayed for a response.

An hour passed, then another as the sun dipped behind the ridgeline to the west. Her body, stiff from the cold, didn't move. She barely felt the temperature drop, barely felt the minutes creep by. Her only focus was the words.

One poem after another passed her lips. Finally, she struck gold.

"My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

For the ends of being and ideal grace."

A curious poem for this search, she fought the urge to analyze it and just let its cadence wash over her. It was a poem she had loved since college, yet one which had never produced any magic. But now, with her hopes set on finding her prey, she could feel the spell taking hold. It was as if something deep in her chest pulled her. Strange music filled her up, steady, yet fierce, like a hammer ringing again and again against an anvil, forging metal out of chaos then breaking down again into fire and fury. It was equal parts rage and sadness and longing for a home that was no longer there.

Then, the image of a man burning in pain filled her mind.

She jumped to her feet and ran from the park. Willa knew exactly where to go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



ALARAWN, WHERE IS HE? Must find him. I'm in control again, but this body resists me. The pain, I can barely stand it. The burning is too much. I need to let it out.

A restaurant. They are all looking, all of these people. Their clothes, so odd, like the others.

Her.

She is one of them. Belongs to him. Comes from him.

The child bears the sins of the father and the father's father. Generation to generation, the destruction churns. She is no different.

The fire he poured down on me, I will give it back to her twice as hot. She is all that remains of him. She must bear the punishment.

Kill all the bastards.

Ah! The pain is too much. I cannot let it out. Why does he resist?

The darkness comes again...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



ELIJAH CAME TO WITH a knee on the concrete floor and a hand planted on a stranger's table. The historian's eyes burned, their temperature catching up with his skin. Everything appeared through a carmine filter—the world turned red.

Revenge. Justice. Death. Fire.

The voice kept shouting in Elijah's mind. It blurred between English and some foreign tongue Elijah did not know, but the meaning was clear.

Whatever it was, whoever it was, they were furious. And they planned something terrible.

Pushing himself to his feet took every ounce of energy. He winced; his own groan rang in his ears like a foghorn. The patron at Elijah's side pushed off his chair and scrambled away. All eyes were fastened on Elijah. Everything fell silent, but for the words in his head. Elijah knew nothing except that he needed to escape. The words had him, and he needed to break free. Murderous rage coursed through him.

He turned to Brooke, the rage filling him again. "I'm sorry," he managed to eke out. "I have to go."

Before she could respond he pushed his pulsating body through the front door and onto the street. The frigid January air did nothing for the burning.

Rex's Lincoln was parked on the curb to the left. Elijah turned right. Moving his legs was nearly impossible. Fear propelled him forward. He stumbled. A road sign caught him and barely held him up. The sound of sizzling condensation filled his ears. The metal softened beneath his fingers as the sign bent and fell to the ground.

The war of emotions was over; rage had won—or perhaps he had given himself over to it. Throbbing replaced the fear. He welcomed the hurt.

Elijah reached down and clutched a *City Paper* box in both hands and pulled. His strength shocked him. He hurled it down the empty street and watched it tumble. Without thinking, he yelled, releasing anger from a century of loss.

The last thing he saw, as the world turned to black, was Willa Weil. With one hand raised, she chanted and walked in his direction.

Then he was no more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



WHO IS THIS IN FRONT of me? This witch? She opposes me again. She must work for them. The Alarawns have cast their lot with the Devil's whore.

She will not stop me. I've waited too long, come too far. I will bring justice.

Strength. I feel it. The fire is power. It fills me, gives me purpose. The old way, how did I ever doubt it? We were so naïve. Organize and compromise. Weakness.

This is true power.

And they gave it to me—now they will pay. I am zduhać. I am but a small piece. His penance will be for the multitude. For every drop of blood, for every life squandered, for every child who goes to bed with nothing but a faint memory of a father he hardly knew—they will pay.

I am justice wreathed in flames.

I will purge this city.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



THE POLICE SCANNER buzzed, a continual annoyance in the lab. But over the years, Chem had accustomed himself to its incessant squawking—its presence overhead now a familiar thing. The crackling voices fashioned a common soundtrack to his many experiments. Chemistry, otherwise isolating, was punctuated by sounds of the streets of Pittsburgh.

His colleagues, who distrusted him anyway, considered the scanner unusual. But they were chemists; they all had their oddities. Chem let their curiosity devolve into the innocuous assumption that he merely had an interest in law enforcement.

They remained unaware, however, of the scanner's true purpose. The illicit nature of Chem's side business demanded it. Coded responses emanating from the small black box alerted him of potential clients—his medical bag prepped and ready for a rapid response. He was always ready to make a few bucks. Knowledge was power, even—and perhaps especially—for the criminally inclined.

The chatter on the radio faded into the background as he studied the lab report. Typical blood work could take weeks to evaluate, but he stared at the analysis of blood he'd drawn from Elijah only an hour earlier. He was a firm believer in the power of a well-placed bribe, and he happened to know an underpaid lab tech who was willing to bend the rules. Having friends in the right places went a long way, and Chem did all he could to never burn a bridge.

"This can't be right," he said.

The chemist went over the data again and a third time. In ways, it looked completely normal, but there was something in the blood that shouldn't be there. Something not human. He leaned against the lab stool and closed his eyes.

Did I place my trust in the wrong lab tech?

In disbelief, Chem looked at the report again.

The historian's blood contained two things that shouldn't be there. Things that were, for the most part, unknown to the scientist who had committed his life to this trade. One was a compound similar to the Baclofen that he had recently "acquired" from the medical lab. But it was different, like nothing he'd ever seen before. Close enough in

structure, but also strangely erratic.

The other factor was vexing. As far as Chem could tell, it had the makeup of a typical VOC—a volatile organic compound. The chemist grabbed a clean slide and applied a drop of Elijah's blood. Sliding it under the microscope, he focused on its composition. The elements that looked like a VOC now appeared similar to benzene, a compound released in the manufacturing of steel.

Any VOC like this could be dangerous, but this particular one was off the charts.

What are you doing here?

He closed his eyes again and considered the mixture of the Baclofen, or whatever it was, and the VOC.

He imagined the result of their mixture when introduced with a catalyst. It would be an explosion of power, of heat. The human body couldn't contain it. Wouldn't survive. This kind of reaction happening inside of a person would blow the body to bits. And yet it sat there, in Elijah Branton's blood.

Then he remembered the burns covering the gangbanger he had treated last night. And the man's rambling words about a monster.

He pictured the burns on Elijah's chest. Somehow, the historian *did* survive.

"Holy shit."

Chem couldn't help laughing like a madman. The answer to his project was swimming around in the blood of a historian from Boston. Elijah's veins contained the keys to human enhancement *and* spontaneous healing.

A voice on the scanner caught his attention.

This is Dispatch. I need a car on Mount Washington to check out a report of an incident.

A second voice rang back, *10-4, Dispatch. This is 221, I'll swing by. What's the issue?*

Thanks, 221. Well, we got a call from a frantic citizen saying a man was out of control.

The officer grunted, *Roger that. That time of the year, I guess.*

221, use caution—man described as a monster.

The man laughed, *Monster? Repeat, Dispatch.*

That's right. A monster. They said they watched him turn into, well, a monster.

10-4, the officer answered with a sigh. I'll check it out.

Chem looked down at the results again. Then he grabbed his medical bag and ran for the door.

CHAPTER THIRTY



*“WHEN, WRAPT IN SELF, the soul enjoys repose,
The wearied brain resigns its fervent heat...”*

Willa’s words continued to flow. They had kept whatever was happening to Elijah at bay for a time, but now Willa could do nothing but slow the transformation. He stumbled toward her. His face was tied in knots, and his eyes were as black as coal. His footsteps plodded and grew heavy.

The spell had pointed her toward Mount Washington, and she had arrived the moment Elijah bolted from the restaurant. She yelled to him, but it was like he couldn’t hear her. He ran down the street away from the building and she followed, finding it hard to believe that the bookish historian had been the thing to attack her the other night.

All doubt disappeared when she saw the change beginning to take him. His skin pulsed, like it was trying to explode. Steam poured off of him. She started chanting, a spell she had never used before, praying that it would work.

Willa focused harder on her magic, her concentration blocking out the world. She and the historian were all that existed. Power coming through the words slowed him, but she knew she couldn’t hold it for long. He yelled, and she could feel the rage in his voice.

Panic struck, and her words faltered.

His transformation was immediate.

Elijah expanded like a dry sponge dropped in a bucket of water. His clothes split apart and fell, tattered rags fluttering to the ground. His skin, covered in red like a massive sunburn, went pale and then grew gray. The gray turned metallic and reflected the light from a street lamp.

As the figure that was once Elijah Branton continued to expand, his metal skin turned dark—like wood charring over a fire. Cracks developed in his metal frame; a glowing ooze, like lava, seeped from each tiny fissure. His eyes turned crimson.

He was Elijah no longer. Now he was the creature from the alley. And she could read murder in its monstrous gaze.

Just twenty paces away, she could make out drops of molten steel left in his wake. The monster screamed. Without turning its attention,

it swung a giant metal arm, knocking a light pole into the street.

Concentrate, Willa, she thought. This is it.

The woman considered running, but she couldn't abandon Elijah, whatever he was. Nor could she let this thing free to rampage. There was no telling what the beast would do—or what it wanted. Willa knew her power might be the only thing to prevent disaster and possibly save his life.

A different poem came to mind. Instead of just speaking the lines, she shouted them, as loud as her voice would carry. She hurled her words at him.

"From the cool cisterns of the midnight air

My spirit drank repose;

The fountain of perpetual peace flows there,—

From those deep cisterns flows."

The monster stopped, dripping steel in one spot. It took a step backward and snarled. Willa kept yelling the lines—as if life depended on them.

Defense would only last so long. The creature was powerful—and pissed. Her mind raced through her catalog of memorized poems. Her arsenal. She prayed in foreign tongues for something to come to her. This pause was just enough for the creature to pull itself together. It took two steps and drew back an enormous arm. The appendage was thick. It dripped molten metal as it moved. Willa stopped thinking and braced for impact. She could feel the heat emanating from the figure.

The attack was well announced, beginning its arc from three steps away. Though not the most graceful, the magician-poet dropped to the concrete and rolled, barely dodging the monster's deliberate movements. She watched the metal fist smash the concrete wall behind her. The clinking sound of rock on metal filled the air. Shrapnel rained. Something hot splashed onto Willa's leg and she screamed in pain.

Desperate to escape, Willa shuffled against the nearest car. She dropped flat on her stomach and rolled under it, looking for whatever shelter she might find. A glowing hand swept the space between her shaking body and the curb. But she was just out of reach.

Catching her breath, she returned to searching for the spell that might knock out the beast. She knew the professor was in there someplace. She needed words that might immobilize without harming the man who had lost control of his body and mind.

Then, amidst the noise and chaos, a word came to her. Then another. And another.

It wasn't a poem she had learned from Edwin. In fact, it wasn't a poem from the Canon at all. It was a simple little rhyme, something her father used to whisper to when she was awoken by a bad dream.

Grab my hand, hold it tight, and you'll be safe all through the night.

She hadn't thought about it in years, but now, the words clanged like a bell in her mind. Desperate to escape.

All thought of her grandfather and the Canon and The Guild with its rules disappeared. There were only the poem and the monster before her.

Willa opened her lips to speak.

"Grab my hand—"

But before she could finish, two steel hands gripped the undercarriage of the vehicle. The creature had given up on reach and traded it for brute strength. The car flipped over into the street. Willa lay prostrate, looking into the eyes of her attacker.

Fear rushed in and pushed the words away. She abandoned the poem and cried out for help. For something to save her.

For someone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



"THERE'S AN EXTRA FIFTY bucks in this for you, if you can get me there in ten minutes."

The driver's eyes looked back at Chem. "Sorry, man, we can't take tips. And getting you up to Mount Washington that fast at this time of the night is damn near impossible."

Chem pulled two dirty hundred-dollar bills from his pocket—part of the wages from his back-alley work. "Make it \$200. And I won't tell if you don't."

The Honda Civic veered into the opposite lane, toward oncoming traffic. Moments before collision, the kid cut back. He drove as a man possessed. Chem glanced at his watch, hoping he wasn't too late.

Twelve minutes later the Honda skidded to a stop three blocks from their destination. Two police vehicles barricaded the road. Chem tossed the bills in the front passenger seat and jumped from the car.

"Thanks, man," the driver said. "Hey, don't forget to leave me a review."

Ignoring him, Chem slammed the door and ran toward the distant sounds of warfare. His long lanky legs straddled the yellow police tape. The cops were crouching, guns drawn, behind open car doors.

"Hey," one of Pittsburgh's finest yelled, "you can't go up there."

Chem shot a look over his shoulders at the boys in blue. "You guys probably want to stay back," he growled.

His legs pumped; the medical bag swung at his side.

He came upon the scene just in time to see an old Honda flipping through the air. A cowering Willa Weil lay exposed at the foot of a monster.

What the hell.

The seven-foot glowing metal beast was terrifying, yet part of Chem was thrilled at the sight. He knew from the lab results that terrible things would could happen to a person exposed to those compounds, but to see the results in action blew his mind.

If the thing before him truly was his new friend, the possibilities were staggering. He imagined what he could do with the vial of Elijah Branton's blood now sitting in his lab. It might be the key to his problem.

He worked to control his rising panic. The scientist in him took over, making observations about the creature and its effects on the outside world. But all that stopped when he realized what it was trying to do.

The beast was about to kill Willa.

Chem ran, picking up a metal pole along the way. It had been melted in half—clearly the monster’s handiwork—but what remained made for one hell of a club.

Chem swung it with all the strength he had.

The monster staggered backward, more out of surprise than in pain as Chem connected the pole with the side of its head.

The weapon left a nasty indent, but as the thing turned to look at him, its molten flesh reformed itself.

“Shit,” Chem yelled as it slammed its fist into the ground. The force of the impact threw Chem through the air.

The creature turned its attention back toward Willa. The frightened professor mumbled something in its direction. One hand raised, she knelt like a martyr ready for her fate. The monster stepped toward her. It lumbered like it was fighting invisible restraints. Somehow, she was doing something to it, though Chem couldn’t guess what.

By the look on her face, Willa couldn’t keep it up for long.

Chem climbed to his feet and opened his medical bag. He reached for a vial of pale blue liquid, and a hypodermic needle.

With enough of his “painkiller” to knock out a horse, the chemist made his move.

“Hey, Fire Balls, come and get me.”

The monster turned, and Chem saw its eyes. They burned red. Still, there was something human, familiar, deep inside. He didn’t need to run a test to know it was Elijah. But as the creature stepped toward him, that insight didn’t offer much comfort.

The hypodermic needle shook in his hand. Chem considered his next play. The further the creature got from Willa, the faster its steps became. Like a swimmer trudging toward the shore, it picked up momentum. The monster roared.

He calculated an escape route and knew he only had seconds to act before his window closed. But he held his ground. This moment could determine the fate of his research, his life’s work. He needed Elijah Branton alive, and the odds decreased if the entire Pittsburgh police force rolled onto the scene. He would have faced fiery death before he’d abandon this chance. Chem balled his fist, not knowing what else to.

As the creature reached a glowing hand toward the scientist, a wave of blue energy pulsed through the air. The monster spun and slammed into a parked car, leaving a dent and heat-rippled paint.

Willa Weil strode forward, both hands raised. She was still mumbling something, and Chem half believed it was her words pinning the monster.

But there was no time to think on it. Chem sprang into action.

With three strides and the aim of an Olympian, he found a crease in the monster's metal exterior. The needle sunk into something; whether it was flesh or not he couldn't be sure. His hand was on fire. There was just enough time to thumb the plunger then roll away.

Chem landed on concrete, scraping skin from his arm. He propped himself up on his elbows and watched the beast stagger forward. The poet continued her song. He wasn't sure what she was doing, but the combination of her hypnotic words and his tranquilizer seemed to be doing the trick.

"Time to turn your ass to ash, bitch," he yelled at the creature.

It stared at him. Chem had pissed it off—and he knew it. The creature took a step forward and the chemist held his breath. After a few drunken strides, the monster's eyes dimmed, and it dropped to its knees. The tranquilizer set in.

The body of the beast pulsed; it twitched with what Chem could only assume was pain. The seven-foot creature progressively lost its stature in front of his eyes. The unformed surface of liquid metal flowed off the monster and pooled at the feet of a burnt, but very human, heap of flesh kneeling on the road.

Chem looked down at Elijah on the sidewalk. Willa, breathing heavy from the fight, stood beside him.

"Nice work, Dr. Weil."

"Yeah. Nothing to it." She patted him on the back. "Nice form."

"Me or him?" Chem nodded at his friend's naked body. "Cause there's nothing that creeps me out more than a naked white guy in public."



THE SHADES OF NIGHT were falling fast, As through an Alpine village
passed A youth, who bore, 'mid snow and ice, A banner with the strange
device, *Excelsior!*

*His brow was sad; his eye beneath, Flashed like a falchion from its
sheath, And like a silver clarion rung*

The accents of that unknown tongue, Excelsior!

*In happy homes he saw the light Of household fires gleam warm and
bright; Above, the spectral glaciers shone, And from his lips escaped a
groan, Excelsior!...*

At break of day, as heavenward

*The pious monks of Saint Bernard Uttered the oft-repeated prayer, A
voice cried through the startled air, Excelsior!*

*A traveller, by the faithful hound, Half-buried in the snow was found,
Still grasping in his hand of ice That banner with the strange device,
Excelsior!*

*There in the twilight cold and gray, Lifeless, but beautiful, he lay, And
from the sky, serene and far, A voice fell, like a falling star, Excelsior!*

“Excelsior,” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



FIRE. ANGER. PAIN.

Elijah awoke from his nightmare with a scream. The same nightmare he had the night before, the same terror.

Deja vu, he thought. Except it wasn't the same. Something was off. This wasn't his room.

Everything about the bed—the sheets, mattress, and pillow—felt foreign to Elijah. Its smell was alien. His body ached, and his eyes were crusted closed with a century's worth of sleep. Prying them open, he found himself in a wholly unfamiliar place.

The late morning sun peeked in through a tiny window, dimly illuminating his surroundings. The room was relatively nondescript: simple dresser, simple mirror, and a small bookcase—shelves sagging with the weight of its contents. The volumes were a mix of old and new.

The door of the room was ajar, just enough to peer into the adjoining kitchen. A figure, distinctly female, cut across his line of sight. She had dark hair, wore sweatpants and a long-sleeved, form-fitting tee. Maybe he had gone out on the town and gotten lucky enough to wind up here. But his body screamed as he shifted in the bed. If it was coitus, it must have been some freaky *50 Shades* action.

Peeling back the sheets, he found himself naked. The thought of nocturnal activities returned, if only for a second. His body was bruised, worse than before. Elijah rolled up onto one elbow, groaning.

The door to the bedroom eased open, and his mystery host appeared.

"You?" he asked, his voice rising an octave.

"You look terrible," Willa said.

Elijah shifted, trying to find a less painful position. He looked up at her, noticing dark circles under her eyes. "You don't quite look ready for the prom yourself, sweetheart."

"And, as charming as ever." The woman looked down at his exposed crotch. "You mind covering up there, champ. I had my fill last night."

Elijah blushed, realizing that his twig and berries were dangling on his leg. "Wait. We didn't...?"

Willa rolled her eyes. "Sorry, you're not my type." She paused. "You *did* try to kill me, though. So, we have that going for us." She paced across the tiny room toward the dresser. Laying her slender fingers on a pile of clothes, she said, "These should fit you. I don't think he's coming back for them. There's a toothbrush and towel in the bathroom. Get cleaned up, and then we'll have story time. Because I have some questions."

She turned to leave.

"Wait," Elijah said. "Did you say I tried to kill you?"

The woman paused for a moment, then grinned. "Pretty sure you did, champ. Lucky for you I was in a good mood."

She left her battered guest alone with his bewilderment.



The hot shower helped Elijah to feel only half-dead. He considered it a good start. A small container of foul-smelling cream with a note, written in what Elijah assumed was Chem's erratic handwriting, balanced on the sink. He rubbed the ointment on his burns and felt immediate relief. There was also another bottle of Chem's painkillers. Elijah grabbed the medicine but decided against taking any. He wanted to know what the hell was going on before he took any more of the strange pills.

The giant scab on his chest remained. Elijah looked closer, convinced there was some pattern trying to emerge. But he couldn't make sense of it. Couldn't make sense of anything.

Blurred images flashed through his mind, memories. Things that he couldn't be true, that he couldn't have experienced. Not sober anyway.

Sharp laughter filled the bathroom. Ragged and angry. Elijah spun, looking for the source. But there was no one there.

But it was a voice he recognized. From the restaurant. Screaming in his mind.

Elijah looked down at the pills again. *Maybe I'm still high*, he concluded.

Gingerly, he pulled on the stranger's clothes. The flannel was baggy around the shoulders but fit well enough. The jeans required two cuffs. Apparently, Willa's ex-boyfriend was a tall drink of water.

Elijah limped his way into the living room. He found Willa on the couch with an orange cat and an open book.

"A single poet surrounded by her cat and books? Cliché much?"

Willa closed the book and set it next to her on the sofa. Petting her cat, she said, "He has his uses, unlike most men—present company included." She grinned, taking off the edge. Willa stood, letting the cat drop to the floor. "Let's get you some breakfast. You're going to need it."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



ELIJAH, WIDE-EYED, pushed the eggs around his plate as Willa concluded her account of the previous day's events. Any semblance of appetite had vanished. She told straight-faced and lacked any hesitation.

The historian looked up in disbelief.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "You want me to believe that last night I turned into a seven-foot metal monster and terrorized a neighborhood on Mount Washington."

"I do."

"And that if it weren't for you and Chem I could have laid waste to the city of Pittsburgh."

"Uh-huh."

"And, after a sprawling fight, you and the chemist got me drugged up enough to carry me off the streets and back to your apartment—all the while dodging the police—where I woke up butt-naked and sore as hell?"

"Yep. I know, it's a tad unbelievable."

Elijah laughed, sending waves of pain through his body. "Honey, it's not unbelievable, it's History Channel nuts. Why are you doing this?"

Willa's brow furrowed. "Doing what, exactly?"

The sincerity in her voice was striking.

"Why the hell are you messing with me? You get your kicks out of this or something? 'There's a new guy in town, let's drug him, beat the hell out of him, and mind-fuck him.' That's sick."

"Elijah, no one's messing with you. This is happening." Willa's voice was steady.

The historian dropped his fork and stood. "Bullshit. It's impossible. Scientifically, experientially, metaphysically, and...and...theologically."

This drew a smile. The poet raised her brows. "Didn't peg you as the religious type."

"You should be locked up."

"Call Percy. Ask him."

Elijah crossed his fingers on the nape of his neck and squeezed.

“Kiva Han, the coffee shop,” he said. “It’s all coming together. That’s where your sick plan started. Just so happened that I ran into you there, and there was Chem too, all buddy-buddy. You two do this twisted shit all the time, or was I your first go at it?”

Willa gave a slight smile. “You’re right. It sounds bizarre.”

Elijah’s mind raced. Anger filled him—old-fashioned, self-interested anger.

He looked for something to throw. “I want you and Chem to stay the hell away from me. You understand?”

Willa’s face turned blood red. Her hands balled into fists. As she watched Elijah head toward the door, her lips started to move. The verses spilled across the room.

“Thou who stealest fire, From the fountains of the past, To glorify the present, oh, haste, Visit my low desire!

Strengthen me, enlighten me!

I faint in this obscurity, Thou dewy dawn of memory.”

Elijah stood still with his hand on the knob. He didn’t look back, but he also didn’t advance. Flashes of fire and steel rose in his mind. He pictured Willa, cowering on the ground, one hand pointing in his direction.

“You felt that, didn’t you?”

“Felt what?” Elijah asked with hesitancy in his voice.

“You’re not the only one with powers.”

The historian turned and faced her. His face was pale—and sad.

“What are you doing to me?”

“I told you,” she said. Gone was the softness in her voice. “I need answers. One of my students has been missing now for almost a week. No one believes me that something is wrong. No one cares. And the only lead I have to go on is a large man in a suit and a ski mask. The last time I saw *him*, is when I first met you. Or rather, the *other* you.”

Despite the heat in her apartment, Elijah could feel the beginnings of a cold sweat. In his mind, a large man in a ski mask stared down at him, laughing.

“Murderous bastard.” The voice droned in his head. Elijah grabbed his temples and squeezed, fighting the rising panic. He considered saying something about it but figured now was the worst time to mention hearing voices.

“You’re remembering, aren’t you?” Willa placed her hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t understand.”

She hesitated, then spoke with confidence.

“My words are helping. Helping you see what really happened.”

“Your words?” His anger receded slowly.

“Strictly speaking, not *my* words, but I have power, Elijah. I’ve

never seen anything like what you did last night, but your abilities aren't exactly unique. There are a few others like us, able to do things that most only see in movies and read on the pages of children's stories. For me, it's the ability to speak and have my words shape the world."

"You can control my mind?" Elijah didn't try to hide his incredulity.

"Not mind control. But certain words have power, and I can tap into that power in a way most can't."

Elijah shook his head, trying to make sense of this bizarre situation. "Well, I'd be lying if I told you that's an easy pill to swallow."

"I understand. Believe me. This is all going to take time. But when you're ready to listen, you need to come talk to me." Her eyes were glassy. "Something is happening in Pittsburgh. Something wicked. And like it or not you're at the center of it. You're going to need us, Elijah. And it seems that we are going to need you as well."

Hardness spread through his face. His bottom lip quivered. "I'm leaving," he said abruptly. "But if you think I'm buying your witches and warlocks bullshit, then you're sick *and* stupid."

The door slammed as Elijah Branton left. Willa was left feeling more alone than ever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



CHEM WALKED TOWARD the lab with his typically slow amble. Some did yoga, some meditated, some even read sacred texts—Chem walked. A mild pace allowed the thirty-five-year-old chemist a chance to process, to unwind, clear his head. But for Chem, it was more than that.

Although he'd never say it out loud, he held a tacit yet unyielding belief that the lab was a place of pure science—for verification, mental rigor, and solid fact. For reality. These mundane aspects of a researcher's life were vital for effective scientific investigation. But true science required more than that. Creativity, wonder, and desire—these things might skew one's perspective, might cause one to misread a lab report or inflate an analysis, but they were necessary for meaningful discovery.

Chem's walk to work gave him the chance to dream.

But the day after the events on Mount Washington, he quickened his steps. A man-turned-monster had torn the dreams from Chem's mind and used them to destroy a small neighborhood. The researcher spent his night mulling over what had happened, trying to make sense of the impossible.

Elijah's turning changed everything. Since med school, Chem had spent all available time trying to do the unfeasible, to bring that which cannot be into existence. It was his *raison d'être*, his glorious project, his manifesto. But progress was slow. Funding remained elusive, his theories and grant proposals were the laughing stock of the academy. He had reached too many dead ends and was running out of options.

The previous night renewed his hope. Future possibilities were born.

His mind was entirely preoccupied with the image of the molten man.

The monster had all of the right attributes of a military-grade bioweapon. Its massive size and strength had been at the core of what Chem wanted when he started his research all those years ago. But on top of that, it also had a steel-like exodermis that was nearly impenetrable—though he would have to test that.

The molten-metal skin constituted a blend of density and malleability perfect for sustaining impact with minimal damage. The fire inside of the creature could even conceivably be directed outward. Clearly, it was a weapon of great value. As a younger man, the value of that power would have been better than any academic prize. But it was more than that. The mixture contained some element that protected its host from utter destruction.

And that piece held his full imagination this morning. If the mixture could make a man strong enough to withstand molten steel, what else could he overcome? Disease? Disability? Death?

But behind those dreams, a singular question gnawed at his mind: *Who created it?*

Every phenomenon had a cause. Every cause could be dissected. A dissected cause can be replicated.

This was the foundation of science. This was his job.

Someone had not only beaten him to the punch but surpassed his most ambitious projections. And it pissed him off. He racked his brain trying to deduce who it may have been. There were certainly some nerds at Carnegie Mellon who were working on similar tests. Some covert, private operation was possible but unlikely. A government project gone awry? None of these answers satisfied him, but it was clear that someone had won the race. He was left in second place—kissing his sister.

His one advantage was Elijah Branton's blood. A small sample sat securely in the lab. But that opened another can of worms. *What the hell is his part in all of this?* If Branton turned out to be an active participant, Chem would shit a brick. The awkward, out-of-shape academic just didn't fit the part of a secret super-soldier. And if he was involved, what was he doing teaching at the University? They'd most likely keep him under lock and key for testing and observation. Why would he come to the chemist for medical help? It would expose the whole program. It didn't make sense.

Chem considered the little he knew about the historian. *It must be connected to his research.*

Whatever it was, his gut told him that Elijah's involvement was outside of his control—which meant that his new friend was in danger.

Chem was thankful that he hadn't been alone on Mount Washington. That twig of a poet did something to the creature, although he didn't know what. The word witchcraft came to mind. Before the encounter, Chem would have called bullshit. This morning, he wasn't so sure. Whatever the case, the lonely-professor was turning out to be quite a woman. She exerted some sort of control over that thing, and she didn't hesitate when it came time to grab the historian

and run. If she weren't such a prude he'd have a huge crush on her.

He'd have to wait until he received Willa's report, but he hoped that Elijah could clarify some things. The creature acted like a man possessed. It wasn't irrational, but it certainly wasn't the person he knew. Clearly, the product had unintended mental effects. The transformation was powerful but sloppy.

The toll—physical and psychological—that it seemed to take on its host was untenable. Who would opt for that kind of procedure? It likely could have killed the man, *should* have killed the man. Not to mention the dangers sustained exposure might entail. Chem was convinced that there was something swimming around in Elijah's blood that was critical to the process. Something that continued to protect and preserve the human from the creature's eruption.

The reaction could be improved upon: developed into something more stable, something controllable. His knowledge and skills could refine the process, enhance it. And produce a desirable commodity.

In the historian's blood were the catalyst for cataclysmic change and an agent of protection.

War *and* peace.

Destruction *and* healing.

Chem nearly skipped the last few steps to the laboratory.



A pair of Sennheiser over-ear phones swallowed his head. Chem hated working daytime hours at the lab. Techs and researchers were everywhere, and they chatted incessantly about local sports teams or administrative gossip. They prioritized camaraderie over doing science. He was ashamed to call them colleagues.

While in the lab, he had to proceed with caution. He was technically trespassing, his employment and access terminated months ago. Bill, the security guard who was the easiest to manipulate, was still out on disability, and Chem couldn't be sure that the new guards hadn't been given his physical description. Chem prayed he wouldn't run into that linebacker who was sure to still be nursing a grudge.

He decided to steer clear of the chemical supply closet.

Chem had to determine the catalyst. It must have been the benzene-like compound that caused Elijah's transformation. The question was, how did it get there, and what triggered the manifestation? If he could find answers to these problems, Chem would be able to not only recreate Elijah Branton but also control the effects of the serum on the human condition.

The next matter at hand was whether or not he could make designer serums that could create diverse enhancements. Whatever was going on in the body of his new friend, it literally changed his

molecular makeup and transformed its substance. In principle, it was reasonable to assume that if some formula of chemical compound could make a super-strong metal man, then it could also make someone supersmart, superfast, or maybe even invisible. Figure out the foundations, and the possibilities could be limitless.

What continued to vex him was *how* exactly he would stabilize the change.

Chem paced the room. Chemical names and symbols rattled around in his head. There had to be an element, an X-factor that, when added to Elijah's blood, could protect the subject through the application of the Vida Serum.

After a hundred more laps around the lab, his eyes landed on the office fridge, which incessantly leaked a small stream of water from its aging guts. But it wasn't the fridge or the water that held his attention. He laughed, staring at the dusty, old cord running to the outlet on the wall. He needed an element that would kick whatever was protecting the historian into overdrive. Something to power it up.

"Mother-fucking Eureka! Thermo-icilin."

He turned to for a bookshelf on the far end of the room. A long time had passed since he last studied the agonist, but he had a hunch that enough of it in the historian's lifeblood *could* sustain a mere mortal through the change.

Too much, and it might just kill them.

Chem's concentration was broken by a vibration in his pocket.

A text from Willa.

He's gone. And pissed. Thinks we're messing with him.

Chem couldn't help but smile. Branton was smart and wholeheartedly committed to empirical evidence. In the science world, evidence came through replication. Maybe if Chem could recreate the experiment that resulted in the monster, Elijah could be convinced.

Just give him some time, he responded. *And give me some time.*

He shoved the phone into his pocket and exhaled. At the moment, he couldn't bother with Willa or the Molten Menace. He had history to change.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



BROOKE LEANED BACK in the leather chair, staring out of her 40th-floor window. The sky was clear. Bright sunlight filtered through the cold air, reflecting off the gleaming city. She always loved winter, loved the brutal clarity it brought with it.

But the view held little interest for her today. Instead, her focus lay entirely on what she saw the night before.

Hell breaking loose in the form of a man.

At her desk lay an editorial discussing Mount Washington's amusing "monster problem." *The Trib* placed the blame on a boring election cycle and the Steelers' postseason failures. Above the fold, the writer even reported a list of nicknames for the allegedly freak of nature. The Molten Menace won out in Brooke's mind for best in show. The editorial went on to decry the whole incident as a hoax propagated by over-imaginative gossip columns and a faked YouTube video.

She folded the paper and dropped it on the desk. Brooke knew better. She had a first-hand account.

Armageddon.

Having just been ditched on a date for the first time in her entire life—and by Elijah Branton of all people—she was present when the screams came.

Everyone ran to find shelter in the back of the restaurant, but not Brooke. She walked straight to the window, almost drawn to the destruction. The beast was a monstrous blend of fire and iron. But there was beauty in it as well.

Power.

Purpose.

And then it was gone. By the time she made it outside the thing had fled around the corner. And Rex—her ever faithful bodyguard—refused to let her go near. He had her bundled in the car and off the mountain before the cops arrived.

But that didn't change the fact that she had seen it.

She turned to her computer and played the video. It was a short grainy thing. Panicked hands shook the camera. But just for a second, the beast came into focus. A creature, screaming to the heavens.

She played it again and again.

In the comments, someone complained that the video was clearly a composite, splicing together a B Grade monster movie with footage of an old foundry. Someone replied that it looked like a foundry that had grown legs.

Brooke was inclined to agree. The thing was a steel mill come to life. She pressed play again.

Despite the poor quality of the video and the changing form of the monster itself, she couldn't take her eyes off the blurred shape stamped on its chest. Almost like a brand.

She paused the video and leaned close, squinting at the fiery lines, convinced she recognized them.

"Ms. Alarawn!"

Brooke jumped. Her assistant Laurie stood before her.

"I have that report you asked for."

Brooke forced a smile. "Thanks, just drop it there."

The young woman nodded, then left gracefully. Brooke looked at the document and sighed.

No way in hell it would be good news.

She scanned the top few pages, assessing the damage. Another failed quarter. The board wouldn't be happy—except for Van Pelt. She could almost imagine his glee. One more nail in the coffin of her leadership. Another piece of evidence that she was as much a failure as her company.

Brooke looked at the grainy image again. She couldn't help but imagine what it would feel like to have that kind of power. What she could do with it. What wrongs she could right.

Her mind danced around the thought of what it might feel like to have Van Pelt cower in fear before her.

She shook herself out of the twisted fantasy, then turned back to reading the report. There would be no magic bullet, no monster, no miracle that would save Alarawn Industries. Nothing but hard work.

And maybe...Elijah Branton.

There was still time, if Project Cold Steel was a success.

She smiled, thinking about their time at the restaurant. She felt different around him, at peace. He was unlike anyone else in her social sphere. Not a networker in a thousand-dollar suit eyeing the next rung up. Just a man, passionate about his work.

She checked her phone again but resisted the urge to call him.

Focus, she urged herself. Or you'll have a snowball's chance in hell of saving this company.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



“HOW COULD YOU BE SO damned stupid, Willa? You operated publicly? Where anyone could see you? For an intelligent young woman, your recklessness astounds me.”

Her grandfather shouted across the table, drops of angry spit wetting the space between them. Willa had hoped that by meeting outside of his private office she could avoid a confrontation like this.

The diner was packed with college students, grabbing a bite before night classes began. A few heads turned, but an oddly animated old man was not uncommon in Oakland.

“What did you expect me to do? Nothing?”

His face grew brighter red than she had ever seen. She half-expected smoke to shoot out of his ears, Yosemite Sam-style. For a brief moment, the magician considered trying a reasoning spell on her grandfather.

She knew it would never work.

“That. Is. Exactly. What. You. Should. Do.” Every word was a dagger. His forehead wrinkled as his eyebrows scrunched down toward the bridge of his nose. “I’ve been telling you this for as long as you’ve had your powers. Yours came early. Mine didn’t manifest until my Ph.D. program, until I had gained some maturity.” Edwin slouched back in the booth. She had never seen him exhibit poor posture before. “I studied poetry for the love of verse itself, its utility unknown to me. When you demonstrated abilities so young, I knew I had to step in—the danger was too great. I didn’t want you to ignore the gift, but I cared too much to see you get hurt.” He paused, catching his breath. “And you told others about us, about what we can do. Don’t you see the danger in that?”

Willa fought the urge to lower her eyes. She couldn’t help but think of Sean, of his involvement with that masked man. Of the danger *he* was in, and how her revealing her powers to Chem and Elijah paled in comparison.

Then she remembered Elijah storming out of her apartment. Maybe he couldn’t be trusted. Maybe he and the Mask were working together.

Her resolve cracked, and she wondered if last night *was* a mistake.

She watched her index finger circle the thick lip of the diner mug.

“At least,” her grandfather continued, “you didn’t use your own magic. Didn’t violate the Canon.”

Willa stared at him, surprised. She hadn’t told him that part of the story, about her father’s words and the way she almost used them.

“How did you know?”

Edwin laughed. “You’re not the first poet to be tempted in the face of danger. But it’s a temptation you must not give into.”

“I know, Master Weil. But—”

“No, Willa. You don’t know. You think you’re informed, wise even,” he said calmly, but with resolve. “But you know nothing. That’s how we all begin.”

She looked up and waited. She could feel a lecture brewing.

“All of your life, you’ve been protected from certain truths. Sheltered. First by your father, then by me. But it is time for you to know. He’ll hate that I am telling you this, but apparently, you distrust *my* warnings. Maybe the truth will grant you caution.”

Willa’s eyes were now glued on her grandfather. “I’m a grown woman.”

“That won’t make this any easier. On either of us.” The old man paused, then took a sip of his tepid brew. “It’s about your mother—and her death.”

“I know how she died. She came home during a break in. The thief panicked and killed her. It was a freak accident. End of story.”

“Yes,” he sighed. “You know that much. What you don’t know, what I never told you, was what came after.”

Edwin pursed his lips. “When I was your age, when all of this was still dark and full,” he swept his hand through his hair and over his beard, “I was a lot like you. I was finishing my dissertation by day and learning the craft of magic by night. I was good, but I lacked a guide.”

Willa nodded, willing him to continue. He rarely talked about his past.

“I lived in a tiny attic apartment. When the world slept, I would get to work on my true love. I memorized poems and explored their deeper magic. I got very good, very fast. You’re in that time now.” He took a sip of coffee. “I started asking the questions that you consider most apt. What use was this knowledge if I couldn’t use it? If I couldn’t help people? The answer I came up with at the ripe old age of twenty-six was: it was of no use. So, in my infinite wisdom, I started to walk the streets at night, looking to make use of the benign verses swimming in my head.

“I’d love to be able to tell you with a straight face that it was altruistic—that I only want to save the world. But that would be a half-truth. And half-truths are as nefarious as damned lies. The reality

of my nighttime escapades was clear to me; I longed to revel in my power. Not the power that can be appreciated in an upper room away from the world, but a power that could change the world.”

Willa had heard her grandfather speak millions of words during her lifetime. But none of them captured her as much as these.

“I hadn’t yet met your grandmother; I had no other family to speak of. I was unattached—the perfect vigilante. I still remember the first night I used the words and experienced the life of the hero. It was cold, a typical February night in Pittsburgh. I must’ve walked for miles, on the lookout for trouble. It wasn’t until a few hours after the third shift that I found it—or it found me. The story was relatively uneventful—a few young mill workers harassing some girls outside of a bar—but it provided the perfect opportunity for me to flex my muscle.

“I’d been rehearsing poems, three poems, which would give me options in a situation such as the one I stumbled into. I approached those guys and told them to go take a hike. They looked at me, a scrawny academic, and laughed. Their inebriation was fully evident. One of them, a barrel-chested brute, spat curses at me that I had never heard before. I asked them again, politely, of course, to desist. That’s when one of them took a swing that gave me this charming bend in my nose.”

Edwin removed his glasses to better display his battle scar. Willa had always wondered how he attained that particular imperfection.

“I had warned them twice, and it seemed that I—and maybe these women—were in danger. That was sufficient justification. I knew exactly which spell to use and I was positive it would work. So I started chanting:

*“Do not be testing me as if I were some ineffectual
boy, or a woman, who knows nothing of the works of warfare.
I know well myself how to fight and kill men in battle...”*

“Is that from Homer?” Willa asked, ignoring the sexism in her grandfather’s poem.

“Good,” her grandfather said, his eyes smiling. “It was simple, only took three lines. Suffice it to say I paid back their discourtesy, and then some.” Her grandfather laughed a deep laugh. “It’s what I was made for. Or so I thought.”

Willa enjoyed the story. Rarely had her grandfather spoke so openly about his past. But she was growing impatient; the disturbing truth had yet to reveal itself. “Okay, so what does this have to do with me, with my mom?”

“Context is everything, Willa. That night marked the beginning of the end. I marched home, victorious—a one-man parade. The power was intoxicating. You know that feeling, don’t you? Last night, you

felt that sublimity. You want more.”

Willa didn't break eye contact, nor did she answer. The question was rhetorical. The old man already knew the truth of those words. He was able to see inside of her, though she didn't know how.

“That night began my righteous crusade to save the city. Sure, it started with a couple of drunk kids outside of a bar, but it escalated quickly. During that time, I lived a dual life, teaching during the day, writing papers and poems, but fighting crime at night. And I didn't work alone. There were others like me, and some distinctly not like me, who agreed that the city had lost its soul. As you now know, people with powers have a way of finding one another. There was a small group of us, meeting over drinks. Most of us, like you and yours it seems, were faculty members.”

“Why?” Willa asked.

The old man shook his head. “Chicken and the egg. Egg and the chicken. Had we developed powers because of our disciplines, or moved towards disciplines because of our powers?” Edwin threw his hands in the air. “I don't think I'll ever really know. But in my day, an inordinate number of champions walked the halls of the Academy.

“A group of us, from different fields, and different ways of life, had come together with a single purpose. Our group of heroes—we even called ourselves that, if you can imagine—looked more like the original University than anything we might find today. Sure, we were specialists, but we were working across the disciplines. Speaking the same language. Our fight against evil was a long one. I saw friends die. I myself came close—a few times—before I stopped.”

“What happened?” Willa asked.

“Well, I met your grandmother. It wasn't long before I shared with her my secret life. She was a practical woman. Your grandmother encouraged me along the path, but it became impossible when your father was born. So, I gave it up. Hung up my cape, so to speak.”

His eyes lost focus—bewitched, for a moment, by sweet nostalgia. But the moment couldn't last.

“It's time, Master Weil. Tell me the truth.”

“Your mother—when my son met her—amazed me. I loved her like she was my own daughter. And her death...I couldn't forgive myself. Couldn't erase the feeling that I was somehow responsible. So once again, I took to the streets. Searching for justice. At least that's what I told myself. Your mother's killer was never found, not by the police. But I never gave up the hunt. And it took me to dark places, Willa. Very dark places. I did terrible things. Nothing was off limits. Nothing. You understand?”

The way he looked at Willa could melt concrete. And she knew then exactly what he meant.

"You broke the Canon." It wasn't a question.

"I needed to find him, Willa. And find him, I did."

He stared down at his hands. They shook as he spoke.

"I'd like to say that I made the honorable choice. That I took the hero's path. But I didn't. I did what felt right, what felt good." He looked up at her, not even trying to fight the tears. "You see, Willa. The thing is, that when you have power like we do, you can try to change the world. But it's the world that changes you."

He shook his head. "Once your mother's killer was dead, I couldn't stop myself. I went out again and again, night after night, doing what appeased my desires. Letting my hunger for vengeance carry me...consume me. And I used whatever poems were at my disposal, the Canon be damned. The old words are powerful in their own way, but sometimes they aren't enough. New words are needed for new times, and they grant new power. Power I wielded without boundaries...until *they* came."

"The Guild," she whispered as if one of them might hear.

"Yes," he replied. "They nearly killed me then and there. They are not known for their mercy, but that night something stayed their hand."

"What was it?"

He shook his head. "A vow. I promised to never use magic again. Your father took you and left Pittsburgh, trying to put me and everything about this place behind him."

She stared at the broken man in front of her, trying to put the pieces together. "I don't get it. I've seen you use magic a thousand times."

"It's a risk I was willing to take, for you. To keep you safe—from yourself, from the dangers of this world, and from them."

The truth in his words couldn't have been clearer. "The Guild, they don't know about me, do they? About our training?"

"No."

"I... I don't understand."

He sighed. "You showed the gift at such an early age. I knew that, left to your own devices, you would pursue the same paths that I did. So, I took it upon myself to protect you. I am not without power, and I used that power to shield us. Here, under my tutelage, you could learn magic and I could protect you from The Guild's eyes, protect you from their influence. It is not without its dangers, but as long as our practice was theoretical, as long as it didn't disrupt the order of things here..."

"As long as I didn't use my magic in public. As long as I didn't use magic on others. And as long as I didn't use it to fix the world."

Edwin nodded. "My rules, designed to keep you safe. To give you

the freedom to explore magic without making a scene. And more importantly, to keep you from falling down the same slippery slope that nearly destroyed me all those years ago. Magic...it does not want to be tied down. As long as you keep it theoretical, you can keep it contained. Keep it pure. But once you start meddling in current affairs, the urge to break rules is overwhelming. You continue down this heroes' path, and you will inevitably end up where I was, forced by virtue of necessity to rely on magic outside of the Canon. That will ring a bell I cannot silence and alert The Guild to your presence."

"I'm not afraid of them," Willa said, and she meant it.

"You should be. But it's not them that truly frightens me. It's the fear of losing you. The urge to break rules always results in the need to break bones. You will lose yourself, Willa. Lose yourself to the power and the sense of purpose that our gift can bring. If you walk this road, you will hurt people. Badly. And on the day The Guild has finally had enough of your infractions, part of you will be grateful that they are there, to put an end to it all. To put an end to *you*."

He reached across the table and took her hand in his. The single most intimate gesture he had ever presented. He paused, licked his lips, and said, "Love the magic, practice it. Love the words, teach them, and write them. But don't meddle in the affairs of the world. I see the goodness that is in your heart. The good you want to do. But the evil that is in this world is far greater. If you try to fight it, it will destroy you, like it nearly destroyed me. Working with you, Willa, it has brought meaning back into my life. I can't lose you like I lost her. Like I lost your father. Like I lost myself. I know that it is hard but staying away from this all...it's the only way. No matter what happens next, you cannot involve yourself."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



“MANY OF YOU ARE HERE, I imagine, because you had a cool history teacher in high school. Or maybe your dad always had the History Channel on. Then again, that’s mostly science fiction and reality TV nowadays.”

Elijah Branton never sat to lecture. He learned from his mentor that such a posture was unbecoming of a faculty member. Oddly, the historian had given up on nearly every other aspect of teaching excellence except that one. He had refused to teach sitting down, until that day.

Every inch of his body ached.

It wasn’t the only shortcut he took. He pulled this lecture out of his old files—and mostly out of his ass. It didn’t fit well with what they were currently studying, but several nights in a row of blacking out and waking up beat to hell didn’t do wonders for his class prep time.

Once upon a time, it was his star opening lecture, back when he taught up in Boston. Elijah had given the same talk a thousand times to a hundred students at twenty schools. His adjunct career was diverse. He hopped from community college to private college to every campus of the UMass system east of Springfield. Most adjuncts were road warriors, and Elijah helped make up their ranks.

“Most of you are freshmen, which means, if statistics hold, that nearly forty percent of you won’t be here next year.”

And, nearly thirty percent of you are asleep right now, he thought.

“Accounting, business, human services, elementary education...I don’t know which it will be, but this course will drive many of you out of history and into another discipline. Some would say that’s my job—to sift out the chaff.”

Students lining the back of the nondescript classroom tapped away at their phones. A few in the middle napped unashamedly. But, there were three students sitting in the first row fastidiously taking notes. Julie, the girl who he had bummed a cigarette from, was also there. She tried to look disinterested, but, with a quick glance, he caught her eye, and she gave him a slight nod. Students like her fueled his love for teaching.

The strange craving for tobacco returned.

Her hand shot up. "Why are you telling us this?"

Good question.

Elijah sighed. The voice was still there, and not a fan of his lecture. It was like having a little brother constantly nagging you, but one that couldn't possibly exist. And yet they're nagging anyway. Elijah pushed on, trying his best to ignore the voice that he didn't believe was actually there.

But real or not it gave him a massive headache.

"Good question, Julie." He smiled, proud of himself that he remembered her name. "Because it's my job to tell the truth. Most of you will wash out because you can't take the workload. But some of you will leave because you love history *too* much." Elijah paused for effect. "I'm standing here today to tell you that the worst historian is the one who *loves* history."

A student in the front row, a high achiever, jerked her head out of her notepad. A furrowed brow exhibited her disbelief in Elijah's words.

"You can revere history. You can admire history. You can understand the deeply important place that history holds in all of human experience. But you must not love her. She cannot be your mistress." He watched a young man in the front row blush. "Or your master."

Julie looked at him like he was high. He barreled on. "There's at least one of you that is already disturbed by this. But here's what I mean: sentimentality corrupts scholarship. The historian, above all else, must be detached. Separate. Objective. Any attachment to the discipline, any motivation other than cold analysis, will leave you writing great-man fanfiction or revisionist history. Maybe the History Channel will hire you."

He paused, letting that sink in. Then he looked at his watch and grabbed his bag. There was somewhere else he needed to be.

"Class dismissed. I'll see you all on Thursday."

He left in a hurry, smiling at the irony. The research he was about to embark on was anything but detached. It was personal. Deeply personal. Try as he might, he couldn't erase the feeling that his life depended on it.

It was time to learn the truth about what was happening to him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



A COUGH CAME FROM THE back end of the Subaru as he turned the key and pressed the gas. It had sat idle since he arrived. Between public transportation and his ride-alongs with Rex, Elijah didn't have much use for his car. He was happy to let it sit. But he didn't want to explain his injuries to the oversized driver or listen to sports talk radio.

The thought of riding the bus again in his condition made him go weak at the knees.

Something was happening to him—there was no use in denying it. The blackouts, the strange memories, the unexplainable bruises and burns. And of course, that bastard breathing down his neck with the strange accent. Whatever it was, he couldn't shake the suspicion that it had to do with his research for the Alarawns.

He hadn't seen, nor heard from Brooke since their dinner. He thought about calling, but caution stayed his hand. Not yet. Not until he knew more. Not until he came up with a story to cover his quick exit from the restaurant.

This left Elijah only his research. He opened the manila folder in his bag—the storehouse for all he'd found to date. Sitting on top laid a copy of the photo from the old history text. Three grizzled steelworkers striking at the mill. The Alarawn's medallion hanging from one of their chests.

Elijah thumbed the medallion. It sat cold in his pocket, it's weird curves and lines strangely comforting.

A direct contrast to the unease the photo made him feel. That man with the medallion, Elijah knew him somehow. Like he was a long-lost friend. Or enemy.

The text didn't list a name for the man with the medallion, but it did for the other two. It had taken Elijah the better part of the morning to make something of them. He combed company records, old city papers, and even membership lists from the city's numerous fraternal orders, churches, and social clubs until he came across what he was looking for.

The name of a daughter of one of the men. And an address.

Elijah smiled, then pulled out of the parking garage.

Traffic was light on I-376 heading out of town. Elijah missed Boston, but he certainly didn't miss its congestion. He pulled a slip of paper out of his pocket and tapped Jelana Novak's address into his phone. It was a stretch, but at this point, he had nothing more to go on. Stabbing blindly in the dark was better than hunkering down and waiting for his sanity to escape him.

Twenty minutes, and almost a dozen wrong turns later, the Subaru eased up to the curb in front of a run-down two-story home in Homestead. Elijah leaned his weary body on the railing as he climbed the three steps toward the porch. He rapped his knuckles on the solid wooden door. While waiting, he took in the neighborhood. It was classic Pittsburgh: tight homes, Steelers flags, and chairs saving on-street parking spots. The sight made him homesick, though he couldn't understand why.

The door opened behind him. The historian turned, surprised to find a twenty-something standing in the doorway. Elijah looked down at his paper and up at the numbers over the door. "Hi. Um, is Ms. Novak here?"

The girl smiled as she looked him up and down. "I'm 'Ms. Novak'," she said with air quotes. "Everybody calls me Lainey. Can I do something for you?"

The historian laughed uncomfortably. "I'm sorry. I'm looking for Jelana Novak."

She nodded as he spoke, rubbing her bare arms as goosebumps raised up on her skin.

"Jelana's my grandmother. She doesn't live here anymore; this is my place. Something I can help you with?"

Elijah glanced at his watch. "I'm kind of in a hurry. Do you know where I can find your grandmother?"

The girl eyed him suspiciously.

"Please. It's important."

"Sure," she said. "She's at St. George's. Been there for five years. But, I have to warn you, she's not really with it, if you know what I mean."

Elijah pulled a notepad out of his back pocket and scratched the name of the facility.

"Thanks, Lainey. I appreciate it."

"Sure. But I gotta ask, why are you looking for my grandmother?"

"I'm doing some research on Alarawn Industries. I understand your great-grandfather worked there. Someone gave me your grandmother's name as the person who could maybe fill me in on some things. I just want to chat."

She laughed. "I really did just waste your time then. Grandma's got nothing kind to say about that place."

Elijah smiled, his hand palming the medallion. “Well, it’s a good thing I know how to ask nicely.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



CHEM PACED THE ROOM as he reviewed his math for the hundredth time. Everyone else in the lab had left for the evening, their experiments resting peacefully in locked storage. Only Chem remained. He couldn't leave, not yet. Not until he pulled the trigger.

Thousands of hours of costly research, hundreds of failed tests, several dozen hopes raised then dashed to pieces all led to this moment, to this union of three innocent looking fluids.

Chem's solution. A cocktail of the chemist's own making forged over nearly a decade of work and designed to bypass the body's natural defenses against tampering—a necessary step toward biochemical human enhancement. But what the mixture contained in elegance, it lacked in potency. The body would accept the solution, but on its own, it failed to produce results. What it needed, was a catalyst.

Elijah Branton's blood.

Part human, part something else. Chem still couldn't wrap his mind around what had happened to the historian, but the results spoke for themselves. Power, pure and simple pulsed through his veins. But with that power came danger and rage and violence, far too unwieldy to suit Chem's needs. Elijah's blood could light the fire, but it needed something to sooth and sustain it. Something to cool things down. Which is where Chem's newest chemical acquisition came into play.

Thermo-icilin.

A change agent that was experimentally used to raise core temperatures. It could work to stabilize the inferno churning in Branton's blood, but in the wrong dosage, it could destroy someone. Chem stared at his three ingredients, waiting patiently to be united by the lab's digital mixer in three-part part harmony to become the answer to all of Chem's problems. The Fountain of Youth. The Holy Grail.

The Vida Serum.

Chem ran the numbers for the hundred and first time. And just like the hundred times before, they added up.

Caution was a virtue rarely ascribed to the chemist. Nor doubt. Nor

fear. But this was the closest he had come in a decade to fulfilling his mission. And at this point, failure was more than a setback. Chem knew what went into his own solution, so he could recreate it. The thermo-icilin was harder to come by. It took a few off the record conversations, a back-alley transaction, and the rest of his cash. But he found it once, he could do it again. Elijah's blood, by definition, was a rarity that could only be acquired in one place. And that place currently wasn't on speaking terms with Chem. But there were ways around that too...

It wasn't the difficulties involved in procuring what he needed that held him back. Chem stood in front of his work, frozen by the sheer unknown of what would happen when he mixed the formula. He felt completely overwhelmed. Thermo-icilin was a stranger to him, and Elijah's blood a mystery of potentially metaphysical proportions. All the theory in the world couldn't erase the question—or the danger.

"There's no progress without risk," Chem said. He wiped the sweat from his palms, then hit go.

The machine hummed gently as the contents of three separate test tubes filtered into one. And then the fireworks started.

Chem felt it before he saw it. The hair on his arms stood tall. His knees went weak. And then he was knocked on his ass.

Sparks and glass rained down around him as the overhead halogen bulbs blew. Darkness filled the room, but before panic could set in, the darkness was replaced by something else.

Chem climbed to his feet and stared at what he had just done. Cold blue light emanated from the corner of the room. He stepped closer.

The mixer was fried, along with half of the adjacent equipment, but the vial holding his serum held strong, lighting his steps. He tried to assess the situation—data collection was crucial at this stage—but awe over what he had just created pushed all scientific training from his brain.

The solution was beautiful. A pulsing, crystalline liquid, deeper blue than anything Chem had ever seen. He imagined the water beneath the polar ice caps wasn't as blue as this, his final project. His Vida Serum.

Chem wasn't an artist, he was a scientist. Beauty wasn't the goal, but results. The only question that mattered now was would it work?

And yet, Chem couldn't help but admire it. Be drawn toward it. Almost like the formula spoke to him. He could see it so clearly. It wanted to be tested. Wanted to come to life. He wondered what would happen if injected it into his blood.

Chem hesitated, his hand halfway reaching for the glass. Instead, he grabbed a pair of tongs and carefully lifted the vial, transporting it to his locked safe on the other end of the room.

He needed some distance, needed to clear his head. He was a scientist, after all. The formula needed to be tested, there was no doubt about that, but only in bad sci-fi movies did a scientist use his product on himself.

But if not him, then who?

Chem double checked that his safe was locked, then looked around the trashed room. He decided to bolt before security came to check in on the commotion he caused. Lab explosions weren't exactly common, but with any luck, they'd blame it on an intern and have the mess cleaned up by tomorrow.

In the meantime, Chem would get some air, and figure out what he was going to do with the serum.

CHAPTER FORTY



ST. GEORGE'S SMELLED like antiseptic and death. Elijah straightened his tie as he walked with confidence toward the front desk. A good portion of research took place in the archives. But more often than not, he found himself trying to get into a closed meeting or land an interview. Confidence worked best.

He smiled broadly at the bored receptionist. "Hello. My name's Dr. Branton, I was just over at Jelana Novak's house for an interview. Her granddaughter told me I could find her here."

"Do you have an appointment?" the receptionist asked, barely looking up.

"An appointment?"

"Yeah. We don't let just anybody walk in and talk to our residents." She stared at him over a set of bifocals.

"Oh, right. Pretty good policy, I guess. Kinda bites me in the ass right now though," Elijah said with a grin.

Thankfully, the receptionist grinned back. "If her granddaughter calls and gives you permission, I'd be happy to see if Ms. Novak would want to see you."

"Oh, yeah. Let me give her a call. Can I have your number?"

"Honey, if I had a dime for every time a young guy like you asked me that..."

Elijah grabbed the scrap of paper from the woman and turned, cursing under his breath for not asking Lainey Novak for her number. He walked away from the receptionist and came up with a longshot.

The phone rang five times before he heard the voice. "Elijah, where the hell have you been?"

"Brooke, hey. Sorry, I've been dodging your messages, it's a long story. But I need a quick favor. I'm chasing down a lead, and I've hit a little obstacle. I know this sounds weird, but I wasn't sure who else to ask. I'm standing in St. George's Assisted Living. Apparently, I'm going to need permission from a relative in order to get in."

Silence greeted him on the other side. He fidgeted, waiting for her response.

"Okay, need me to have Rex do something?"

"No. Actually, I need *you*..."

Elijah heard a laugh on the other side. He hoped it was a good one.

"I've been waiting for those words from you, Dr. Branton. Okay. I'll play your little game."

Elijah smiled; he was starting to like having Brooke Alarawn as an ally. "Okay, here's all I have. Jelana Novak was a secretary for a company called Alarawn Industries. Have you heard of them?"

"Rings a bell," Brooke said. Elijah could picture her smart smile.

"Her granddaughter's name is Lainey. I assume it's Jelana, too. But I'm not quite sure. I figure your job taught you to make up shit on the fly."

"Learned that in college. You know, a bunch of asshole professors."

"Funny. You got this. Here's the number."

The phone at the receptionist's desk rang. Elijah took three steps back and held his breath. The receptionist talked, then smiled, and laughed. Brooke was good. The woman jotted a few notes on a yellow legal pad. Finally, she pulled the phone from her face and hung up.

"That girl's funny," the receptionist said with a snort.

Elijah shrugged. "I just met her. She seemed nice."

"Let me give Ms. Novak a call. I'm sure she's probably free. She doesn't get many visitors."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



IN THE LOUNGE, A GROUP sat on a tattered old couch watching reruns of “Golden Girls.” A foursome played bridge in a corner at a table. And one man in a long blue terry cloth bathrobe stood by himself taking the whole scene in. His lips moved periodically but nothing came out.

Elijah sat on an overstuffed chair across the coffee table from Jelana Novak. She looked out of place in her perfectly pressed pantsuit. She held an air of confidence about her that the others lacked.

“You know Lainey?” she asked the historian.

“We only just met. I found your name online, on the Internet...”

“I know what the Internet is,” the woman snapped.

Elijah forced an uncomfortable smile. “Right. Of course. So, I want to ask you some questions, about Alarawn Industries. Alarawn Steel.”

Jelana pursed her lips. “I worked there for years. But that place, that place is no friend of mine.”

It is the place of the damned, the now-familiar voice echoed in Elijah’s head. He squeezed his eyes closed, trying to push it away.

Opening them, he nodded and focused on Mrs. Novak. “Actually, I think that’s what I want to talk to you about. Your father, he worked there in the early part of the century, right?”

“Yes, sir. My father worked there. His father worked there. I worked there. Some would say we’re part of the Alarawn family. I would not. But I don’t know what I can tell you.” The woman’s face was vacant.

“I’m trying to figure out as much as I can about the worker movement of 1902. Did your family tell you stories?”

The woman leaned back in her chair. She gripped its arms, her knuckles going white. “All we did was tell stories, but I don’t have much to say about that. I think I’m what you academics would call a dead end.”

“Anything you could tell me would be helpful. About your father and the men he worked with. Anything about the Alarawns. About Thomas. I believe he was still in charge at that time.”

At the sound of that name, Jelana’s body stiffened.

“*Đavo. Da će trunuti u paklu.*” Jelana made the sign of the cross and kissed her fingers.

Although Elijah couldn’t explain how, he knew exactly what she was saying. A knot tied in his stomach, his skin grew hot. “What do you mean they are evil?”

Mrs. Novak’s eyes went wide. She was as shocked as he was by his linguistic skills.

“That family, that man...he did things, terrible things. My family was terrified to speak his name, even decades after he was gone.”

On je proklet—and his seed shall taste fire.

Elijah kept his gaze on her, ignoring the voice once more.

The woman stood, crossing her arms. “I’m sorry, Dr. Branton, I don’t have anything more to give you. Our time is over.”

Elijah stood as well. “Please, ma’am, I need help. I have something to show you.” Elijah reached into his pocket. He could feel the medallion cold against his fingers.

He pulled it out and held it up. “Do you know what this is?”

The woman gasped. “You need to go now,” she nearly shouted at him. “You need to go now, *zduhać*. Leave me. I’m at peace. Leave me now. There’s nothing else I can do.”

The woman was screaming. Two staff members in scrubs came over and took Elijah by the arms. They led him out of St. George’s, nearly throwing him down the concrete steps.

Elijah’s mind raced. There was much he had to make sense of. The conversation with Willa in her apartment and all that transpired still seemed like a dream. It also felt like a lifetime ago.

Driving through the Squirrel Hill tunnels, back toward the city, he couldn’t get the wild look in Jelana Novak’s eyes out of his mind. She was panicked—in a frenzy. What could Thomas Alarawn have done to give him such a reputation? The medallion was obviously important—he needed to figure out why.

As he broke out of the tunnels, the memory of the voice returned to him. It had something to do with all of this. Or he had clearly slid into madness.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



“I DON’T KNOW HOW TO help him. He’s either lying to us about what he knows, or he’s telling the truth about being in the dark. In which case, he thinks we’re the liars.” Willa sipped her caramel latte. She seemed tired, like she had just run a marathon and had another one planned for the next day. “Either way, there’s a trust barrier that is impossible to cross.”

Chem nodded along as the poet spoke, but his mind was far from this conversation. The Vida Serum sat in the lab, just waiting to be tested. It consumed his thoughts, threatening a distinct lack of objectivity from the scientist. So, he had called Willa and left to get coffee, hoping some space from the serum would clear his mind. So far, it was an utter failure.

Chem took a sip of the light roast and willed himself to focus.

“I don’t fault him for being a little skeptical,” he said. “Hell, I’m skeptical, and I saw him change with my own damn eyes.”

Kiva Han was a good place to meet. Patrons packed the small shop like sardines in a can, but they got a small table positioned under a Jackson Pollock clone. The indie rock playing over the speakers mixed with the grinding of coffee beans provided cover for their conversation.

Willa lowered her voice anyway. “So, what do we do?”

Chem shrugged. “Why do *you* have to do anything? What’s your deal with all this?”

Willa hesitated. She wasn’t the same person Chem spoke to only yesterday, like something was holding her back. “Mount Washington wasn’t my first encounter with the...the creature. The night before, I had a run in with him outside the university.”

“Shit,” Chem said. “And you survived?”

She nodded. “I had help. From a man in a ski mask. The exact man, in fact, that I had been looking for.”

He waited, figuring it was best to let her spill the rest of the story at her own pace.

“One of my students is missing. Sean. I’m convinced this masked man has something to do with it. But he’s a ghost. My only lead is Elijah. If I can bring the pieces together, I might have a chance of

finding the kid.”

“I don’t know. He saved you from the creature. Maybe Mr. Ski Mask is one of the good guys.”

She stared into her cup. There was no doubt in her reply. “No. Definitely not one of the good guys. Whatever he was doing that night, saving me was ancillary to his goal. It was more like...he was saving Elijah. Like he has some sort of plan for him.” She looked up and locked eyes. “Percy, I’m terrified about what that plan might be.”

Chem wanted to make a joke, something to lighten the tension. But nothing came to mind. She was right. The thought of that thing let loose with some nefarious purpose...that was no world he wanted to live in. He thought again about which lab in the city could be behind this monstrous creation, but there were no answers to be found that way.

“Then we better make sure we’re ready. I’ll try and get ahold of him. See if he’ll talk to me. I can be pretty persuasive. I’m one charming motherfucker.”

“So, you’ve told me.” Willa smiled. “The question is, does he want to believe?” She paused, taking in the room. “How did you subdue him, anyway?”

“The wonders of science, darling. It’s nice that one of us specializes in something useful.”

Willa broke into laughter. “No offense, Percy, but I’m pretty sure my poems were quite useful last night. In fact, if it weren’t for those lines, you would’ve been in some serious trouble.”

Chem couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “Speaking of skepticism, I’m not saying I believe your story either. You definitely had some effect on him, I’ll give you that much. But magical poetry? That’s some grade-A fairytale bullshit right there.”

She leaned back in her chair, a quizzical look on her face. “And a giant metal creature tossing cars? I’m sure that fits perfectly within your scientific worldview.”

“*Touché*. That thing was...paradigm-altering, to say the least. But I’ve been analyzing his blood, and I’m sure there’s a physical explanation. I’ll just say that it was a damn good thing I had that little cocktail of mine to knock your boy out with. A little powered-up painkiller can go a long way.”

“What did you find in his blood?”

Chem hesitated for a moment. His project had been his secret for five years now. But something about this poet made him want to reveal all. Her earnestness was rare. And if there was any truth to her magical abilities, then Chem was sure it wasn’t a truth she shared often. He felt compelled to reciprocate, to open up as well.

Instead, he dodged her question, falling back on his same old lines.

“Let me put it in terms that a liberal artist can understand. I think Elijah’s transformation was the result of biological tampering. The next big scientific breakthrough won’t be computers or robotics. It will be the ability to shape human DNA. We’re on the cusp of something huge, and its applications are nearly endless. Longer life, enhanced mental acuity, defense against disease—not to mention weapons. Human bioweapon systems. I started working on a formula for it over a decade ago.”

Willa’s brows rose. “Hold on. You want to create monsters like that thing?”

“Monsters are in the eye of the beholder. And *I* want to behold him. But, not like what we encountered the other night. Whoever did that to him, they injected him with something powerful, beyond what I’ve ever seen. The problem with Elijah right now is that there’s no control. When he turns he has no idea what he’s doing. I’m trying to configure a way to not only create the transformation but also include a stabilizing component that will give the transformed subject control over their mind and body.

“The power is limitless if I can just figure it out. Think of the good that we could do with that kind of knowledge. And I’m not just talking about his strength. The bigger deal, in my mind, is the healing that accompanies it. He dips his ass in molten metal every night and wakes up with nothing more than second-degree burns. Forget the flipping cars bullshit. That is some potentially life-saving science right there. We need *that*.”

Willa stared into her empty cup. Chem assumed she was picturing him as some sort of Frankenstein. “Who’s we?” she asked.

Chem shook his head. This was going too far. He looked her dead in the eye as he tried to dodge the question. “I’m just saying, there’s no need to hide from the future. Obviously, what’s happening to E is not ideal, but...”

He stopped. The look on her face told him she was no longer tracking with him anyway.

Shit. Here comes the “man was not meant to meddle” speech.

But she surprised him. “I understand. This is a broken world. Maybe it’s worth becoming a monster to stop monsters.”

Willa stared at her hands, almost as if that last line was meant for someone else. She seemed to him like someone gearing up to do something dangerous.

Finally, she rose from her chair. “I’ve got to go. I wanted to say thanks, for the other night. I would have been toast if you hadn’t shown up.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “But maybe don’t count on it either. I’d much rather be chained to my desk than out playing hero.”

She nodded. "Before this is over, we may all have to learn to play hero. Or learn to accept the consequences."

Chem ran his hands across his head and exhaled. "Accepting consequences has never been a strength of mine."

Willa gave him a weak smile, which twisted something in his heart. She reached out across the table and took his massive hand in her tiny fingers. "I'm going to need you, Percy. Elijah needs you." She let go of his hand, and without another word, stood and gathered her things.

Chem watched Willa weave through the busy shop. Her dress swished as she moved.

He finished his coffee and sat, alone, pondering her words. She was right, and he knew it.

Damn poet. This is why science is a solitary affair.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



THE SUN DIPPED LOW as Elijah raced down the sidewalks of Pittsburgh, not sure where he was going, just knowing that he had to move. His car lay blocks, maybe miles behind him. But he didn't care. His head swam.

The old woman's words tore at him. She called him a *zduhać*. And by the way she looked at him, he could only imagine it meant monster.

Maybe I am.

His phone dinged with an alert, bringing him back to reality.

After being removed from the nursing facility, Elijah used what little presence of mind he had left to send an email to an old friend from grad school who focused on Eastern European history. He was just now getting the reply.

Hey, E!

Not sure why you're digging around my neck of the discipline, but I'm happy to help.

That symbol you sent me on the medallion is definitely Slavic in origin, though I don't know much more than that.

No way is it Welsh, so I'd wager it didn't originate with the Alarawn family. Some sort of cultic artifact if I had to guess, probably belonging to a minor deity. Christianity tried to wipe out the old religions, but people in these parts have long memories. Many of the old ways remain strong. Other than that, you're on your own.

As for the word you asked about, *zduhać*, there are whole books I could send you on the subject.

Elijah took a deep breath. This was the answer he was looking for. Maybe it would provide a way out from this chaos.

A *zduhać* is a kind of tutelary spirit—a defender of a place. Kind of like a guardian angel, but of a town rather than a specific person. They were real people, from a historical perspective. We know many of their names and histories. Most were chiefs or great men and women from small villages. But here's where it gets really interesting. They were supposed to possess great powers.

The old-timers still swear by it, that it's not a myth. It's a little vague what they could do, but most of the stories say that these protectors would 'leave their bodies' when evil was near. The hero would fall asleep and wage battle against encroaching spirits. Supposedly they had great strength and could rip trees from the ground. When they woke up, they'd have scratches and bruises all over their bodies—evidence of the fight.

Blood drained from Elijah's face. His chest itched.

He stumbled forward, barely able to read the rest of the email. It couldn't be a coincidence, all the things that happened to him.

Laughter rang through his mind and Elijah panicked. He bolted, sprinting as fast as his academic legs could take him. He ran until the wind left him, and he collapsed on his knees in some empty lot, chest heaving. The laughter only grew louder.

"What is happening to me!" Elijah shouted.

"Hey man, you okay?"

Elijah looked up. Three men were moving toward him, cruel smiles on their faces.

"I'm uh, I'm fine," he choked out. A different kind of fear struck his gut.

"Well, we better help you out, just in case. Why don't you let me carry your bag there? You know, lighten the load."

"Yeah," another one snickered. "And I'll take your watch."

"Look," Elijah said. "I don't want any trouble."

"Then you came to the wrong neighborhood man."

Without warning, the man lashed out. His fist was small but hard, and Elijah's head was ringing by the time he hit the ground.

Elijah spit blood. "Just...just leave me alone." He couldn't keep the quiver from his voice, and his pleas went unheard.

The second man kicked him hard in the side.

Elijah had never been in a fight before. He expected the pain to be excruciating. But all he felt was heat. The heat spread with every kick—and with it, the rage.

Elijah struggled to his feet. "Stop. Please. You don't know what you're doing."

But they didn't hear him, and then the voice took over. This time it wasn't in his head. It was on his lips.

"I'll kill every last one of you dogs," it growled.

"Woah," the leader said taking a step back. "Tough guy, huh. This is my city you little shit. I'll do what I want. I'll rip your arms off and shove them up your ass."

He punched Elijah hard in the stomach. The historian doubled over.

When Elijah looked back up, fire poured from his eyes. The men

stepped back in fear.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” the voice speaking through Elijah said. His skin had already started to pulse. “This is *my* city.”

As darkness began to take Elijah, the sound of his roar overpowered the sound of their futile cries for help.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



ELIJAH CAME TO A MOMENT later, but he wasn't himself. He was the passenger now, and the voice was the driver. The strange body moved without his control. But he could feel it. His body was a raging fire with steel bubbling and dripping around him. He stared down at the three frightened men.

The voice spoke through him again, and this time it was low and gravelly. Like if a furnace grew lips.

"Now, what was that you were saying about ripping off arms?"

One of the men, the biggest, decided he no longer liked the odds. He tried to run, but Elijah's body was too fast. The creature grabbed him by the head and threw him hard into a rusted out old dumpster. His body flopped to the ground in an unnatural way.

The second man tried the offensive. He had a small knife with him and slashed at Elijah's giant arms. If it had an effect, it was erased instantly as the liquid steel reformed around the gash. The voice just laughed then kicked. His foot was like an elephant's, sending the man reeling.

The last of the men, the one in charge, froze in place. Elijah could hear his whimpers over the voice's laughter.

The creature leaned forward and grabbed both arms, lifting the man up overhead. He screamed, and Elijah could smell burning flesh.

The creature dropped him to the ground and raised a fist. The thug wouldn't survive the impact.

Elijah yelled, and somehow his voice got through.

"No!"

The arm faltered in midair.

The voice shouted. "Let go of me. Let me finish this fool. *Pravda* cannot rest until the world is refined of the evil filth."

"You can't kill him," Elijah shouted back. He strained with every ounce of will. The arm remained frozen.

"They deserve death. They are a scourge upon my city."

"You still can't kill them," Elijah managed to urge, knowing it was futile.

As they stood there, warring against each other, the sound of squealing tires rang through the air. A beat-up old Mustang charged at

them. Elijah released his grip, and the creature turned with just enough time to shield itself from the blow.

Even so, the impact threw it to the ground.

As the creature struggled to regain its feet, dazed by the impact, the driver of the car scrambled out and managed to drag his damaged friends into the car. The creature lunged after it, but the mustang peeled off before he could stop them.

It screamed, its voice filled with rage, and he slammed his giant fists into a brick wall. It crumbled under the blow like a board before a black belt.

"Why did you stop me?" it shouted.

"I... I don't know," was all Elijah could muster.

"You are weak. You and your questions and your fear. You are nothing more than a child, crying for his mother. This city doesn't need your kind. It needs *me*, needs my strength. I will bring justice to my people."

The creature raged as it spoke, smashing at the brick wall and throwing whatever it could find.

"Who are you?" Elijah asked.

"Once, they called me Gabrijel. But no longer. That man has died."

"But...but..." Elijah hesitated. Afraid to ask the question. "But what *are* you?" Elijah finally spat out. "Is it true? You really are what the old lady said. A *zduhać*?"

The creature stopped and fell to its knees. "That...was what they called my father. I never believed it, never believed the legends were true. Instead, I trusted in what strength my human body could muster. But then that bastard Alarawn and his men...what they did to me. It must have unlocked the power within. The strength of my heritage. And I will use it to crush them all."

"But why now? Why return after nearly a century? And why...why me?"

The creature shrugged. Steel rippled at the motion.

Its voice lowered and became almost calm. "I do not know how it works historian, but I do know that this body is mine now. You've had your chance, and you chose to bury yourself in books. But I've set us both free."

"No." Elijah's voice was barely a whisper. "This body, it's mine. You can't have it."

The voice laughed. "I can't? And what are you going to do little man? You can't stop me. I will destroy the line of Alarawn and everything he ever loved."

Elijah saw what the creature imagined, saw the hell it wanted to unleash on its crusade. He pictured Brooke Alarawn dead, nothing more than a crushed, charred body.

“No!” Elijah’s voice grew in strength. He tried to gain control, but the creature resisted. They thrashed about in the darkness, pitting will against will.

To an outside observer, it would have looked like a volcano fighting itself.

The creature’s strength was incredible. It will be forged through a century of rage. And yet, Elijah refused to give up. The body he never cared for was now the only thing he wanted.

The creature fell to a knee. Elijah could feel the voice’s strength falter. For all its anger, the thing couldn’t compare to Elijah’s desperation.

“Get out of my body,” Elijah shouted.

“You can’t survive without me,” the voice replied. But it was growing fainter.

“Get out of my head!”

As Elijah shouted, the creature’s voice melted together with his own. He fell to the ground. Steel rushed off of him in a wave. The pain was surreal, but it couldn’t compare to the relief of the cool night air on his skin.

You are weak!

Elijah collapsed naked on the ground, crying over and over: “Get out of my head.”

Nothing and no one responded.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



BROOKE WALKED BACK and forth between her living room and her kitchen. The spacious apartment offered plenty of room for pacing, an activity Brooke found herself engaging in more and more as of late.

Stress required action, but at this hour, there were few options.

In college, she played soccer. It was the perfect escape. On the field, she was no longer Brooke Alarawn, heiress to her parents' empire. She was simply a girl with a ball and the will to drive through anyone standing in her way. On the pitch, she had power not given to her by her name but crafted through diligent work and endless determination.

She took another lap, but her frustrations failed to dissipate. After reviewing the hopeless quarterly report, Brooke couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. Her instincts had saved her from failure on more than one occasion, so she placed a great deal of trust in them.

She asked Rex to sniff around, see if anything was brewing, but he had yet to report back in. Hence the stress, and therefore, the pacing.

Her apartment came equipped with a state-of-the-art gym, but she seldom could muster much enthusiasm for working out for its sake. Soccer was a competition, a battle between opposing forces. Working out was nothing more than a necessity.

Her phone buzzed, and she snapped it off her concrete countertop.

"What did you find?"

Rex's voice crackled in reply.

"Nothing good. Van Pelt has scheduled an emergency meeting of the executive board for tomorrow. He's going to call for a vote of no confidence in your leadership."

"That's bullshit," she replied. "He doesn't have the votes for something like that."

Rex waited a second, and then said, "You're the expert, but I don't imagine a guy like Van Pelt bluffs."

He was right, and she knew it. She ran through the board members in her mind. If Van Pelt had the numbers, then someone must have flipped.

"Dammit," Brooke shouted into the empty apartment. Rex was

silent on the other end, waiting for her orders. But she had none to give.

This was the end, she knew it. She had failed, and tomorrow would bear the fruit of that failure.

“Ma’am, there may be a solution.”

“What do you mean?”

“Project Cold Steel was an honorable move. But there are other...ways. To deal with men like Van Pelt. I could take care of it for you.”

Silence. Brooke took a breath, amazed at what he had just suggested. The callousness in his voice, like he was offering to pick up her dry cleaning, stunned her. She wondered about Rex, and what unspeakable deeds he had accomplished for her father.

She’d be lying if she said it didn’t pique her interest. There was a certain simplicity in it all. Van Pelt was trying to ruin her. She would simply beat him to it.

“No.” She spoke the word quickly, willing it to erase the thoughts she just had. “No, you’ve done enough. Tomorrow, come what may, I’ll confront the board myself. If we lose, we lose. It’s not the end of the world.”

She hung up the phone and relief began to take the place of stress. Her family’s company had consumed her life since her parents passed. And she accepted that without complaint. She did everything she could—no one could fault her effort.

Some things just weren’t meant to be.

She grabbed a glass and began to pour herself a drink when another idea came to her. She smiled, grabbed her coat and turned toward the door.

It had been a long time since she went on a real date.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



SEAN'S APARTMENT HAD changed little since Willa had last been there. Someone, probably a landlord, had taped cardboard over the window in a meager attempt to keep the cold at bay. It was failing miserably.

Paper still laid strewn across the floor, with shards of broken plaster now adding to the chaos. Willa could see the truck-sized dent in the cheap wall from where her one good spell had slammed the man in the mask.

There was no sign of him. Or Sean. No matter how hard she tried, her thoughts kept returning to him.

So much had happened in the last few days, and yet the world moved on. Like no one even cared. Maybe it was better that way. Keep your business to yourself. Stay out of trouble. Her grandfather would sure be relieved.

But what would have happened to Elijah had she refused to help? She could have stayed in, gotten her grading done, laughed with the rest of the city about the monster hoax.

Maybe everything would have been fine. Or maybe he would have burned Mount Washington to the ground. Who's to say?

But the truth of the matter was that she *did* get involved. Now their lives were woven together. She could feel it—even if Elijah refused to answer her calls.

No matter how hard the historian tried to doubt, he couldn't deny what he was. The monster would emerge again, and she might not be there to stop it.

Willa knelt and stared at the superhero comics littering the floor. She picked one up and a piece of paper slid out from it, floating to the ground. Willa grabbed it. It was a page, torn out of a textbook Willa assigned this year. In the blank spaces along the margin were words carefully written in Sean's handwriting.

It was a poem:

**There is a place where no one knows me,
a town where no one sees,
a city, both cold as sin and smoky,
a home where brave hearts freeze.**

**But in this place, I am stronger,
under this town I thrive,
through this city my reach grows longer,
and with my home I rise.**

Willa held the scrap of paper, refusing to let the tears flow. The simplicity of Sean's words couldn't detract from their honesty. She looked back at the comic, and it was then, staring at the garishly dressed defenders of justice with a student's poem running through her mind that Willa realized the truth.

She couldn't deny who she was either.

Edwin had made his choice—to give up his real power, to hide from his responsibilities. But Willa couldn't follow her grandfather's path. Even if it meant becoming the kind of person she despised, even if it meant provoking The Guild, she couldn't leave the ones she cared about to their own fate.

There was no other choice.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



ELIJAH STOOD UNDER the shower, letting the steaming water wash away the grime and blood and gravel. He couldn't help but smile, couldn't help but hope that the haunting was finally over. Finished. He was free of the demon from beyond.

The voice had been silent ever since the mugging, leaving Elijah alone with only his own thoughts and his own emotions.

He towed off, pleased that the pain had somewhat subsided. Either that or he had become numb to the sting. Chem's creme continued to do wonders for the burns, and he could deal with the few remaining cuts and bruises. Even his face began to look like his own.

Elijah threw on a loose-fitting shirt and pants, then looked around his bedroom. It was a disaster. Charred and bloodied clothes littered the ground, and his research was spilled out on the bed.

He started there, grabbing every note and photocopy he had made since coming to Pittsburgh and shoving it back into its file folder. Then he placed the stack within the drawer by his bedside.

Elijah hesitated, grabbed the Alarawn medallion and threw it in as well.

He bundled all his clothes and found a spot for them in the closet, then changed his sheets.

Looking around the room, Elijah was pleased with its new ordered state. He had never subscribed to the clean house, clean mind mantra, but there was a first time for everything. With all evidence of insanity packed neatly away, he hoped his mind could relax for good. Soon it all would be nothing more than a distant memory, one he could deny even to himself.

His phone buzzed.

He didn't need to look to know who it was. Willa had called him several times, and now Chem was getting in on the action. He grabbed the phone and added it to the drawer in his nightstand.

Elijah felt a little guilty. It turned out the other academics were more or less telling the truth about what had happened on Mount Washington. Which meant that they very well may have kept him out of prison or better yet, kept him alive. He owed them at least a conversation.

But tonight, he was sick of monsters and magic. Sick of chaos. Sick of Pittsburgh.

He fully intended to do nothing but drink, watch TV, and enjoy a thoroughly uneventful evening.

A knock at the door stopped him from turning on the television. He considered ignoring it but decided to do the neighborly thing and see who it was. Then he could get back to the boring.

But the person standing behind the door was anything but boring. “Brooke?”

She smiled as she leaned in the doorway. A bottle of whiskey dangled from her hand. “Hey. This thing is heavy. Want to help me lighten it?”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



BEFORE COMING TO PITTSBURGH, few things caught Elijah off guard. He had developed a way of rolling with the punches and being shocked by nothing. Maybe it was the academic in him and the way his mind analyzed bits of historical data and then synthesized them into meaningful units. Maybe it was the no-nonsense, drama-free Scottish stock on his maternal side.

Neither his cognitive superpowers nor his family heritage prepared him for the knot that twisted in his stomach when the heiress of Pittsburgh steel came knocking.

“Well?” Brooke asked, standing in front of him. She finally gave up on waiting and squeezed between Elijah and the doorjamb. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Clearing his throat, Elijah spun to follow her into the kitchen just off the foyer. Brooke dropped the bottle on the island and looked around. “This place isn’t bad,” she said, taking in the room.

“Yeah. It is yours.”

Brooke laughed. “I guess it is. Maybe I should take a day and have Rex show me all the properties.”

“How many are there?”

Brooke shrugged. “Damned if I know.” She peeled the wax off the top of the dusty bottle and pulled out the cork. Holding it to her nose she drew in the aroma. She closed her eyes and let out something like a purr. “Whiskey. I love the damn stuff. Could drink it all day long.”

She opened her eyes and watched him, but all Elijah could do was grin like a schoolboy standing in the presence of the prom queen. “You?” she asked tilting the bottle toward him. “Or do you prefer something more Eastern European.”

“What?” he mumbled, still a little in shock.

“You know. The *pastrmajlija*, or whatever the hell that stuff was at the restaurant. The thing you ordered right before you turned green and ghosted me.”

Elijah’s face burned. He pushed his hand through his kinky dark hair and tried to smile, but it felt all out of place. “About that...”

Brooke waved him off. “Water under the bridge, Elijah. I didn’t come to bust your balls. What I really need is a little time to unwind

and have drinks with someone who really doesn't give a rat's ass about Alarawn Industries for one night."

"Well, I *am* writing your history."

Brooke turned to look for glasses in his nearly bare cabinets. She found a mismatching pair of tumblers on the top shelf and blew out the dust. "Yes. But I read one of your papers on research methodology before I hired your ass." Her voice dropped an octave and slipped into a monotone. "The researcher, above all things, must maintain a stance of objectivity toward the subject at hand."

"That's not what I wrote."

She laughed, then continued, "When it comes down to it, the mature historical researcher can't give a flyin' fuck about that which he studies, or else the apocalypse will come. Fire and brimstone will rain down upon historians everywhere and the riders of the—"

Elijah held up his hands, trying to hold back his smile. "Okay, okay. I get it. I'm a cold bastard. Now stop already."

She tilted her head and smiled. A dimple popped into view on one cheek, a detail he had failed to notice before that night. "Our cold researcher. Detached. Exactly what we needed. Someone who cared little enough about reality to be able to bend the truth in our direction."

"Or desperate enough to be willing to."

"Speaking of being a cold bastard," she held up the bottle, "rocks? Or do you want to save the ice for your face?"

Elijah's hand instinctively shot to his cheek. "Neat. Like my scholarship."

"The hell does that mean?"

"No idea." He laughed again. "Sounded cooler in my head before I said it out loud."

Brooke poured two fingers of the Gentleman for each of them and added a splash of water to open up the flavor. Without a word, she sauntered the few paces out of the kitchen area to the living room. She landed on the leather couch that was only a little bigger than a loveseat and patted the spot next to her. "Come, Squire. Amuse your queen."

He crossed the room and bowed deeply before taking a seat next to her. Their legs were inches from touching, which only increased the knot in his stomach. "Amusement was nowhere in my contract, my lady. But I serve at the pleasure of the sovereign."

"And serve you will," Brooke said with an eyebrow raised.

They sat like that, just looking at each other for a beat. Each of them waiting for the other to cut through the silence. Finally, Elijah raised his glass. "You came to me with the bottle. What are we toasting to tonight, Brooke?"

She clinked the lip of her glass against his and took a sip. "I'll toast the next one. This is just an appetizer. Why don't we start with how your face got mauled?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. The first rule of Fight Club."

"Oh. That's hot."

"Yeah, just me and a bunch of other sweaty academics. Shirts off, abs out. Rolling around on a concrete basement floor for hours on end."

Brooke furrowed her brow. "I always wondered why old Doc Thomas would go to three conferences every semester."

Elijah nodded, stroking his beard. "Tenacious Thomas. I remember him well. Old as dirt but had a mean right hook. Dirty, too."

Brooke laughed. "Okay. That image is the *best*. Doc Thomas wouldn't have been able to fight his way out of a preschool. He was my Econometrics prof." She sighed and looked up at the ceiling, a smile spreading on her lips as the memories of college rushed back. "Now, *that* man was the epitome of the absent-minded professor. One day he came in with his button-up on inside out."

"Bullshit. That's just some cliché you saw in a movie."

Brooke sipped her drink. "Clichés have to come from somewhere. He *always* had chalk covering the back of whatever he was wearing from leaning against the blackboard."

Elijah laughed. "Sounds like my kind of guy." He took a long pull on his own drink, and added, "But give the man a break. I mean, we all have to trade something in to make room for all of the extraordinarily important information we're cramming into our brains."

"You mean like the function of perfect multicollinearity?"

"No idea what that even is," he replied.

"Exactly. Never used most of that shit in running the business." Brooke nudged Elijah in the ribs, which sent a quick shock of pain through his side. "Tell me about one of yours."

Elijah sat for a moment running through the list of *Who's Who* of his most eccentric professors. "Okay. Got it. Dr. Nicole Moore," Elijah said.

"Ooh, Nicci Moore. Sounds cute."

"She might have been, back in the late 19th century. That old bird was a trip. She taught Medieval European Artifacts."

"Wait. That's even a course?"

"Not just a course. An entire specialty."

They looked at each other, and both cried at once, "Dr. Jones!"

Elijah laughed. "Exactly. But she was nothing like Indy, and no one fawned over her, especially around finals week. It was pure hell, and *she* was the serpent incarnate."

“Do tell...”

They sat like that, laughing and telling college stories through the first and second drink. Elijah couldn't be sure if it was the alcohol, but he was beginning to feel something he hadn't felt since he had left Boston—maybe since long before the day that he left.

Comfort.

Picking up the bottle, which had made its way over to the coffee table, he poured another round. “You forgot your toast.”

“I try to stay away from wheat products. Bad for overall fitness” She smiled waiting for a response.

“Don't use that one again,” Elijah said, trying to keep a straight face.

“Come on! That was good.”

He shook his head. “I can say, with a moderately clear head, that that joke was objectively bad.”

She ignored him and raised her glass. Without breaking her gaze on his eyes, she said, “To new beginnings.”

“I'll drink to that.”

They tilted their tumblers, and Elijah reveled in the strong brown liquor. Then her words hit him.

“Wait. What the hell does that mean?”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



BROOKE PULLED A FOOT up underneath her and leaned back as she sipped on her whiskey. As she shifted positions, her knee rested on Elijah's thigh, causing him to instinctually flinch, but not draw away. The touch sent a warmth through her body, a warmth she hadn't felt for a long time.

Alarawn Industries had taken its toll, not least of which was the completed sapping of her relational life. Her most intimate human interactions lately included begging suppliers to keep their prices low and running through profit and loss statements with her CFO. The historian's presence meant the world to her, and a little innocent touch was exactly what she needed.

Evidently, Elijah wasn't paying attention to her leg resting on his. His brain still processed the bomb she dropped, trying to make sense of her words. The look on Elijah's face was almost comical.

"Are you saying you're done?" he stuttered. "With AI?"

Brooke sipped her drink, not breaking eye contact with him. "Technically I won't be done until tomorrow. But no one could fault me the early celebration. The board rode my ass again. Van Pelt and friends have no plan on letting me succeed. They knew I was as good as done before I moved back to Pittsburgh, I imagine. I guess they didn't expect that Little Orphan Alarawn would be able to hold on for so long."

"Shit." Elijah exhaled long as slow, finally looking away from her and off into the distance. "Brooke, I'm...I'm so sorry."

Brooke turned her glass up and finished the third round. "I'm not, surprisingly. When I finally made the decision, it felt like a load came right off my shoulders. Felt something I never experienced before."

"Oh, yeah. What's that?"

She shrugged. "Freedom, I guess. With AI behind me, the entire world is ahead. There are so many things I can do, and frankly, I'll have the resources to do just about anything I want."

"Sounds nice. Guess I'm out a job then, huh?"

Brooke shook her head. "My last act as CEO will be to guarantee your funding. I doubt they'd fight it. The report will still be good for the company, and I don't think they'd want to get into a tussle over

your contract.”

His eyes became vacant, and Elijah nodded slightly. “I imagine this last chapter will be a doozy.”

She placed her hand on his arm. “I better say that *all* of this is off the record, Dr. Branton.” She laughed, and he followed suit, his eyes cutting down to inspect her hand still on his arm. “But I didn’t come to talk about work. And don’t worry, if Van Pelt cans your ass, I could always keep you around as my houseboy for a while. Until the money runs out.”

Giving his arm a gentle squeeze, she reached for the bottle.

“Only one more,” Elijah said. “I need to hit the library tomorrow and keep turning out the pages before the paychecks stop rolling in.”

“We better make it a big one then,” Brooke said as she refreshed their tumblers and pushed one into his waiting hand.

Elijah shifted and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his Levi’s. “Join me for one of these on the balcony?”

She repositioned her body and placed her feet on the floor. “You don’t smoke.”

“Your background check was that good, huh?”

“The best,” she said with a smile. “Okay, but just one.”

The three-by-five balcony was modest but afforded a great view of the city. The blue lines of the David H. Lawrence Convention Center fluttered a few hundred yards away. Elijah leaned against the cold wall and inhaled the Marlboro.

“Need to work on your form—you look like a thirteen-year-old girl.” Brooke took a deep drag from her cigarette and held it. She blew it out over the balcony railing.

“Well, you’ve got it down,” he admitted.

“Old college habits,” she said. “Didn’t help much on the soccer pitch... And if I get hooked on these again, I swear I’ll make you pay.” She spun the liquid in her glass. “But there’s nothing like a glass of mid-shelf whiskey and a smoke. That’s for sure.”

Brooke stood looking out over the city. She spent her days going on and on about the virtues of Pittsburgh, and her deep love for the place. But she had no idea when she took the time to just stop and admire it all.

“You know what those blue lines are?” Brooke asked, pointing at the bright blue lights that swept up the arching roof of the convention center.

Elijah watched the lights. “Diodes, LEDs, or something?”

Brooke closed her eyes. “*The depression deepened to the sound of voices chanting that prosperity was just around the corner, the country was fundamentally sound.*” She opened her eyes and locked them on his. “It’s Thomas Bell, *Out of this Furnace*. Mostly anti-business propaganda

—of course—but a beautiful fiction. That blue light isn't a static line. It's actually the scrolling text of several famous Pittsburgh authors. I much prefer Dillard's *American Childhood*." She paused. "This city, it loves deeply. Those blue lights are a monument to our creative past."

Elijah nodded. "A lot of hurt in this town."

"A lot of hope, too," Brooke shot back.

He leaned against the brick wall and took her in, apparently a little too drunk to talk local literature. "Hard to imagine which will win."

Elijah Branton was an odd character. Brooke was certain of that. But this is precisely why she came. All she needed was some human connection, no matter how odd the partner. Every moment they spent together, she enjoyed him more. In another world, maybe they would have been something. After AI, maybe they still could. She could only imagine what the tabloids would do with the unlikely couple.

Feeling the urge of the booze in her bloodstream, she stepped up closer to him. Grabbing his chin, she turned his head to the side and looked more closely at his wound.

"I don't know, but maybe you should consider getting a second opinion. This doctor you picked up in Oakland, you just found him online or something?"

"Nope. We met a couple of weeks ago. He gave me his card, told me to let him know if I ever needed anything. He actually helped me before. I had another night like last—or at least I think so. Woke up with these weird bruises and a scar on my face."

"Helluva sleepwalking problem you got there, Doc. Or a drinking problem."

"You're not helping with the latter." Elijah half-laughed, half-coughed as he held up his glass of whiskey. Smoke seeped out several orifices. "The first time he patched me up and took some blood. I've been meaning to ask him if he ran the tests."

Silence settled over the balcony.

Brooke took a step back and stared at him. "He took your blood, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Which hospital does he work at?" Brooke asked.

He cocked his head, which drew a grimace. "I'm sorry?"

"This doc of yours, where does he work? If you want I can call in a specialist. We like to take care of our employees. I mean... you are still my employee for the twenty-four hours or so."

Elijah took a long draw of Gentleman Jack and a final drag on his cigarette. "Well, he doesn't actually."

"Doesn't what?"

"Work at a hospital. Never finished his residency. Actually, he's a chemist by trade. A researcher at the university."

She stared at him for a second, then laughed. “You are an odd, odd bird, Elijah Branton.”

“I’ve been called worse. Odd enough to scare you away?”

“Not a chance. I find it endearing. Charming even.” She stepped closer so that their toes were almost touching. “It’s strange but being with you makes me feel different.”

“How so?”

“I’m not sure how to explain it. But being here...” she motioned toward the city. “Being here like this makes me feel more human.”

Elijah reached out and grabbed her hand in his. His touch was warm on her skin chilled by the deep winter night. Their fingers interlaced, and she could feel like they were somehow two opposites coming together. Like hot and cold. Brooke tilted her head back and finished her glass. She took a slow, sexy drag of the cigarette—doing a French inhale.

“When I drink like this,” she said. “There’s only two things I want to do. Smoke cigarettes.”

“What’s the other?”

“This.”

Brooke closed the gap between them and stepped up on her tiptoes, gently placing her lips on his. They were soft and warm, like his hand. Almost hot. Reaching up, she swept her fingers through his hair.

“Whoa,” Elijah said, taking a step back. She almost laughed at the look of shock and awe on his face.

Brooke deposited the burning butt of the cowboy-killer into the balcony ashtray and opened the sliding door. She turned her head back toward the open-mouthed historian. “Let’s go inside before this wears off. I’ll take it easy on you—in your condition and all.”



THE MAGIC WORKED FASTER this time. Willa used the same spell as before, and she used it without hesitation. Once again, the man in the mask was nowhere to be found. Nor was the walking foundry, which meant that Elijah seemed to be keeping his demons at bay. But this time, Willa wasn't looking for a threat. She was looking for a victim.

She was looking for Sean.

The park was silent. She returned to her spot with her spellbook and one new addition.

A tattered slip of paper, torn from an old textbook.

Willa stared at Sean's poem, using the memory of him to ground her. She channeled her magic out into the city, praying for answers. Hours later, she got a faint response—almost a whimper. It was music, like last time. But unlike last time, the song was quiet, like a dying breeze pushing through tall grass.

This spell was still new to her. She was still unclear how it worked, but she would have to trust it. She had nothing else but the worry in her gut.

The spell led her toward the river.

She had the driver drop her off at a bar several miles from where the magic pulled her. Then she hoofed it down to the water at a decent pace. At this time of the night the river access area was empty, or at least it should have been. All dark warehouses and empty parking lots. But Willa could see she wasn't alone. Two men in cheap suits stood guard next to a nondescript building. If she had been there in the daytime, she would have walked right past it.

The guards spoke to each other in hushed tones, and yet their whispers pierced the still air like bullets.

"Damn it's cold." The smaller one bounced back and forth from one foot to the other. It could have been from the low temperature, or more likely tensed nerves.

"Wear a thicker coat next time." This guy was older. He had a gray goatee trimmed tight. But his age didn't detract from his bulk.

"Next time? Don't understand why there's even a *this* time. Freakin' waste if you ask me."

"Yeah, well I didn't ask ya. And neither did the big man. I don't go

around questioning his orders. I've seen what happened to those who do."

The small man looked hard at his partner. "You really believe what they say about him? What he really is?"

Goatee paused for a second. Willa could barely hear his reply.

"Yes. Now shut your damn mouth, Johnny, before you get us both killed."

She crept as close as she dared then prepared to make her move. It was foolish, charging in one against two. But she knew the big man they spoke of, and her magic had led her here. Which meant Sean might just be inside.

The only choice she had was which man to go after first.

She picked up a loose brick, one among many scattered in the brush beneath her, and started chanting.

"Hey, did you hear something?" Johnny twisted back and forth searching. His partner didn't say anything. Instead, his eyes bulged, and his face turned purple.

"Hey, what's going on?" Johnny's voice shook a little. "Mac? Snap out of it man."

But Mac couldn't speak, couldn't breathe like a tremendous weight pressed down upon his chest. By straining his considerable muscles, he was able to lift his arm and point, just past Johnny's head.

The small man spun to look and took a brick to the face. He dropped without a whimper.

Willa stood over him, making sure he was really out before she released her spell on Mac. He fell on his hands and knees. With a cough, he looked up at her. Terror filled his eyes.

"What are you?"

A boot to the goatee was her only reply, and the big man laid in the dirt next to his partner.

Willa grabbed the door handle and entered the darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



YELLOW LIGHT FILTERED in through the windows, illuminating the otherwise dark building. Willa's first thought was that she had the purpose of the building all wrong. It wasn't a warehouse, but some kind of small boathouse. She could hear the splash of the water outside echo off the metal walls.

It wasn't the sound that grabbed her, but her other senses. Something smelled.

Something rotten.

Willa's heart thumped in her throat.

A narrow set of steps led her downward, and she walked quickly. Small boats of varying kinds filled the room, stacked haphazardly. She weaved through the maze, hands clenched, the words of a defensive spell ready on her lips.

Her grandfather's words rang in her ears. To be careful. To be cautious. To be safe.

In the back corner of the building, underneath a cracked window, she found a small canoe. She moved toward it, trying to keep the panic at bay. She failed the moment she saw the body.

Sean's body.

She didn't even try to stifle the rage that overtook her.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



A FAINT BUZZING SOUND woke Brooke from an easy dream in which she was making snow angels in a warm bed of fluffy white snow. She opened her eyes in the darkness, in a strange bed.

Elijah Branton's bed.

Brooke shook her head. She couldn't believe she had just slept with someone who had the potential to be more than a one-night stand. It was hasty. Irresponsible. And exactly what she needed.

Since taking control of Alarawn Industries, keeping men at a distance had become her status quo. Detachment was safer. Gave her more space to focus on work.

She would have far more time for things like this once she was voted out.

She smiled, then looked over at the man. He snored quietly on his back, sheet pulled down to his stomach. A large scar covered his chest—one she hadn't noticed while taking his shirt off in the dark.

Brooke leaned in closer. A distinct shape fought to show itself. Something familiar, but she couldn't quite place it.

Buzzing interrupted her thoughts.

She reached for her phone, but there were no new messages. Then she heard it again, coming from the nightstand on her left.

She pulled open the drawer and saw Elijah's phone. A message from someone named Chem blinked up at her.

Dude—stop being such a dick and return my call. We have to talk about your shit. I'm close to figuring out what caused the reaction. Call me before you melt all over the city.

Brooke read the message again, trying to make sense of it. She thought about unlocking his phone to get more of the context, but she didn't want to overstep and invade his privacy. Plus, she didn't know his password.

She returned the phone to the drawer and saw that it sat upon a manila folder. The words **PROJECT COLD STEEL** in bold letters on top.

Her curiosity got the better of her. She figured it couldn't hurt to get a sneak peek at his research, especially now that it didn't really matter. She had commissioned it after all.

She opened the folder. Her great grandfather's medallion stared up at her. She ran her fingers across its carved lines, feeling the unique shape.

She gasped as she recognized what it truly was.

There, on Elijah's chest was the same symbol—clear as day now that she knew what she was looking for. The diamond intersected by harsh, curved lines.

What the hell?

There was no denying its resemblance. The uniqueness of its shape made it clear. Brooke had never seen it anywhere else.

Then it struck her. She actually had seen it elsewhere.

She flipped through a couple pages of notes and came across a printed-out photo. The image was grainy, a screenshot from a poorly made YouTube video. One that Brooke had watched a hundred times.

The Molten Menace, screaming on Mount Washington. And there, wreathed in flames on its chest stood her family's symbol.

Brooke scrambled out of bed and dressed quickly without taking her eyes off Elijah. Panic replaced the peace she had felt only moments earlier.

She turned toward the door, then stopped, her mind already calculating. She turned back, grabbed the folder with Elijah's notes and the medallion, and fled.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE



BROOKE SAT IN THE TORN-up driveway of the old mill, letting the engine idle. She had been here only once before, with her father. The day they closed the mill down.

She remembered the cursing, the angry faces of the workers as they filed out for the last time. All their rage directed at her dad.

As they sat there watching, Brooke, only a child at the time, had asked why it was happening. Her father's words still carried the same weight they did that day. "We close one, so the others can survive. We do this for Pittsburgh. It hurts now, seeing their anger. And I'm angry too, but it's the hottest fires that forge the coldest steel."

Now as she stared at the empty building, she understood for the first time what he meant. Sacrifice. That's what being a hero was all about.

She stared down at the notes scattered across the passenger seat. Elijah's notes. It was clear now that he had lied to her, almost from the start. She didn't quite understand his chicken scratch and got the sense that he didn't either. Monsters. Magic. Ghosts from her family's past.

It all reads like some gruesome children's fantasy.

And yet...she had been there. She had seen the monster with her own eyes.

Brooke reached into the passenger side and grabbed a wool beanie and a flashlight. She slid the medallion into the pocket of her puffy jacket.

Everything about the mill looked tired and abused. An amateur Grips tag and an enormous penis were spray-painted on the building's side. She grinned. *Kids*. A chain draped around the handles of the main entrance likely had kept people out for some time. Now, a Master Lock sat broken in the dust. Mills like this were surprisingly popular among urban adventurers. Although that mostly consisted of teenagers looking for a place to get high. Their trespasses didn't bother her much. If the old building could offer some amusement, so be it.

She pulled open the door and was hit by three decades' worth of must. Flicking on the flashlight, she stepped across the threshold.

The beam illuminated the manager's office through a broken window. Apart from the thin layer of dust that covered everything, the office looked as if it were ready for a week's work: papers neatly stacked in well-ordered piles, a pen lined up perfectly parallel with the edge of the desk. Even a coffee mug with the handle turned in for a left-handed employee sat, waiting for its master to return. There was a certain sadness to the scene; a foreshadowing of what was in store for the rest of AI.

Brooke couldn't bring herself to look any longer. She switched the flashlight to her right hand and stuffed her dominant hand into her pocket. Cold metal reminded her why she had come. She drew the medallion out and held it inches from her face. It glimmered in the artificial light.

Brooke stared at the strange symbol, half expecting it to come alive. The curved lines were dynamic, penetrating the diamond shape at its center. She wondered if there was power in the place—in the medallion itself. Or if it was another false hope. Her slender hand curled around the ornate metal token. Foolish or not, it was an option she needed to try.

The crunching of concrete and broken glass echoed through the hall as she proceeded past the other offices. Water, filtered through cracks in the ceiling, made a pathway in the dirt on the floor. She pushed open a door and stepped into the mill.

Fresh footprints, likely from Elijah, led her toward a metal-grate staircase. It ascended from the plant floor to a platform overlooking the main work area. She climbed, hearing the metal groan beneath her feet. She trusted the metal like family. In ways, Pittsburgh steel was the Alarawn family's backbone—the true patriarch. It wouldn't let her down.

Crossing the plant from above, she found a spot where the railing was broken. Turning the light toward the fracture, she noticed the break was fresh, like the footprints. Oxidation hadn't tarnished the exposed metal.

Finding another staircase, Brooke made her way down to the floor. Underneath the walkway, she discovered several lengths of broken metal—the missing piece of the guardrail. Cracks ran in the concrete beneath her feet.

In front of her was an open-hearth furnace. She placed her hand upon the large cauldron, the crucible, capable of containing boiling steel. But those fires were long dead. A cold chill ran up her arm.

With one hand on the furnace and another on the medallion, Brooke found herself praying—whether to her father, her grandfather, or God, she couldn't say. But she begged for something to happen, anything. There was some secret here, she knew it. She stood in her

factory, *her* legacy. Whatever happened to Elijah Branton, whatever power he possessed, it was meant for her.

She punched the cauldron. Pain surged through her hand. She hit it again, screaming. "It's not fair. What the hell am I supposed to do?" Her cries echoed throughout the building, but the mill returned no answer.

An hour later she emerged from the abandoned factory. Tired, her knuckles bloody, she sat in her car and laughed at her stupidity. *Magic and demons. What bullshit. I must be truly desperate.* Elijah's transformation was real, that she didn't doubt. But there must have been another explanation. She thought about their night together; his body, covered with bruises and strange burns. It was better than she expected. He was so anxious to be with her. It was exhilarating to be that wanted.

But it was all a lie. He was no different than Van Pelt.

She rifled through the notes again, looking for the missing piece. It was there she found the small business card.

Percival Carver Scott, Chemical Research.

Then she smiled as she remembered the text message on Elijah's phone.

Pulling out her cell phone she typed a hasty message to Rex.

Mill was a bust, but I have a new lead. I need you to do something for me after all. I think we can save the company.



LAY ME ON AN ANVIL, O God.

Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar.

Let me pry loose old walls.

Let me lift and loosen old foundations.

Lay me on an anvil, O God.

Beat me and hammer me into a steel spike.

Drive me into the girders that hold a skyscraper together.

Take red-hot rivets and fasten me into the central girders.

Let me be the great nail holding a skyscraper through blue nights into white stars.

“Prayers of Steel,” Carl Sandburg

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR



CHEM BALANCED A STARBUCKS cup on his padfolio as he pulled the outside door open. This feat of dexterity was a daily event for him. He slid through the gap and swiped his identification at the next set of doors. Beeping, the doors clicked unlocked.

“Hey, Bill.” Chem nodded to the guard seated at the desk.

The middle-aged security guard returned the gesture. The man’s arm was still in a sling from a recent workplace accident. Apparently, someone had broken into a medical supply closet and blew the place up.

The chemist felt bad that his friend suffered, but if you want to make an omelet... “How’s the arm healing up?”

“It’s okay. You know, occupational hazard and all.” Bill’s friendly smile only made the chemist feel worse.

“In the line of duty, right?” Chem grinned.

“Always.”

As he paced toward the lab, Chem pushed the guilt out of his mind. It wasn’t hard. The Vida Serum filled his mind. The project was all he ever thought about, and it neared completion—ready for animal testing. He briefly considered skipping the mandatory lab tests in order to expedite the process. Making little metal monster mice wouldn’t show its effects on humans, and it was the stabilizing compound of thermo-icilin with Elijah’s blood that needed to be mastered.

But, research ethics aside, the question of who the subject would be remained. Naturally, he couldn’t administer it to himself. He was the scientist, after all. Chem needed to remain disconnected, objective. A night’s worth of good sleep helped him regain that.

He considered placing an ad on Craigslist for a test patient. This tactic always drew a hundred college students and a few meth-heads desperate for cash. It could work, but it left too many variables out of his control. There was no telling what his compound would do to a person.

Elijah’s changed form was nearly perfect. If the transformation could be replicated and then altered into diverse enhancements, Chem would be breaking new ground in the biochemical community. These

kinds of results would change his life forever.

Chem kept thinking of the other side of the equation. The aspect of Elijah's blood that kept him alive through the change and led to what Chem could only consider his rapid healing. If the serum worked, if it effectively could isolate this factor and mobilize it with the icilin, there was no telling what Chem could accomplish.

The door to his lab was ajar and light seeped into the hall. Chem was always the first to arrive—and the last to leave.

Someone is against a deadline, he thought, looking at the cracked door.

The room was empty—and clean. Chem scanned for any signs of other occupants, but everything was put away and untouched. The machines were still broken, but maintenance had come by to change the lights.

Perfect, he thought, realizing he could get to work right away.

He settled into his workspace. Pulling out his composition book, he reviewed the notes. Chem turned to his lockbox—where his sensitive materials were stored. As he moved the key toward its home, something caught his eye. Scratches. The shiny metal surrounding the keyhole was scuffed. The edge of the box was slightly bent.

What the hell?

Sweat beaded on his forehead.

Chem opened the box. The serum was missing.

“No. Shit. No,” Chem screamed into the empty lab.

He stood and paced.

“Think, man, think.”

He turned to run back toward the guards' desk but first, he grabbed the untouched Starbucks and another vial from his lockbox.



“I don't know, brother. I'd love to help, but we need to get clearance first to allow you to look at the tapes.” Bill paused and pursed his lips. “You sure you didn't put your stuff somewhere else? Maybe your partner took it out for further, um, analysis—or whatever.”

“I don't have a partner,” Chem replied through clenched teeth. “And this is *not* the kind of thing you misplace.” He paused, realizing he was getting forceful. “Listen, Bill, let's just skip all the bureaucratic bullshit. You know I'll keep my mouth shut.”

The portly guard laughed. “I know that, Chem. You're the only egghead who actually treats me like a human. But with the other breakin, I'm kind of on thin ice. I can't lose this job. You know, with Katie in school and all. Just can't risk it. I'm sorry.” Bill's eyes pleaded with him.

Chem smiled and nodded. "I get it, man. It's cool."

Bill opened the desk drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper. He slid it across the table. "Here. Make this report out. I'll come down and check out the lab, and we'll get this in today. We should be able to watch the film by this time tomorrow." He tapped the desktop tower, which held the recordings. "This baby's not going anywhere." His mouth curled in an uncomfortable smile.

"It's cool, Bill. You know I wouldn't want to do anything that would hurt your family." Chem nodded and turned to go. He took three steps stopped and turned. "Bill, I almost forgot." He paced back to the desk.

"What's that?" Bill said.

"I picked up a coffee for you. Black. The only way to take it," Chem said.

The two men laughed. "Kind of racist, don't you think?" Bill winked.

"Only if *you* say it." Chem smiled, placed the coffee on the desk, and walked back toward the lab. Turning the corner, he stopped and leaned against the wall. He pulled out his phone and noted the time, then opened his Facebook app. It always amazed him to see what the people from his childhood were up to. If they only knew the work of *his* hands. After three minutes, he pocketed the phone and walked back to the desk.

Right on time, Bill.

The guard was slumped in his chair, chin on his chest. Chem slid over the desk and squeezed his legs into the tight space next to his unconscious friend. He pulled out a laptop from his bag and linked a USB cord to the desktop computer. Within two minutes he had the surveillance video downloaded to his hard drive. He dropped his computer into the bag and pulled out a vial and hypodermic needle. Chem rotated Bill's left arm and gave the antecubital vein a quick slap. Thankfully, Bill had the pipes of a bull. "Sorry, man. Again."

He thrust the needle into the vein and shoved the plunger with one swift move. Chem was able to dislodge the needle and drop it into his open bag just as Bill opened his eyes.

"What...what...what happened?"

Chem raised his eyebrows. "Beats me. I just came back—I left my phone." He waved his phone in the air. "You were all slumped down. I thought I was gonna have to give you CPR. Looking at that mouth of yours, I decided to pray instead."

Bill shook his head and rubbed his hands across his face.

"Your face is pale as shit," Chem said. "You want me to call an ambulance?"

Bill pushed his palms against his eyes. "No. I think I'm all right.

Just a little groggy. My shift's almost over."

Chem nodded. "All right. But be careful, okay?"

The chemist grabbed the sedative-spiked coffee and paced toward his lab.



Back at the lab, Chem sat in a cubicle facing the door. He wore his headphones. The video didn't include sound, but it was a barrier to keep his colleagues at bay if they should show up. Chem pulled up the file and scrolled the time stamp to the moment he had left the lab. The video player ran at 10X speed; nothing happened for nearly thirty minutes. Finally, a figure entered the room.

Walking across the camera's line of vision, the figure blacked out the screen. A few seconds passed, and the screen washed out white, as the light filtered back into the lens. The man strode with intention directly for Chem's work area. He knew exactly what he was there for.

What the shit damn hell?

Chem rubbed his eyes and squinted, only inches from the screen. He pulled his glasses from his nose and then put them back in place. But the video was clear as day.

An enormous man in a perfect suit and a cheap black mask was stealing his life's work.

Chem had no idea who the thief was, or where he might find him. But a cold sweat began to creep down his back.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE



A TWO-INCH BEAM OF light shone through a crack in the curtains directly across Elijah Branton's eyes. He was sure his body still hurt like hell, but he couldn't feel anything except the pounding of his head.

The headache was well-earned.

Reaching over, he found the space on the full-sized bed next to him vacant and cold. But her smell still lingered in the room.

So, it wasn't a dream after all.

Emotions swept over him. Sadness came first. Below the surface, Elijah was the quintessential romantic. He wished she had stayed for breakfast or at least a quick cup of coffee. But contentment soon replaced the disappointment, and he laid there still for a moment, relishing the memory of his evening with Brooke Alarawn. The sex was good. But there was something about their connection that remained deeper than the carnal experience. He laid there, smiling, playing the conversations and her full laughter over in his mind.

Finally, Elijah pulled out his phone. He flicked through a dozen or so campus-wide emails and student notes asking for extensions on assignments. But there, unopened and nagging at the back of his mind was a series of messages originating from one Willa Weil. She had been trying to get ahold of him since he stormed out of her apartment, but he wasn't ready for that conversation.

Not yet.

He hoped the poet would fade from his mind like a bad dream, the way his passenger had left him. Lying there in his soft bed—after a perfect night—it was easy to pretend that the craziness of the last few days was just that. Craziness. Now he could settle back into his life. His teaching and his research and whatever the hell was going to happen with Brooke.

But still, those messages stared up at him. Elijah hesitated for a second, then pressed delete. Again and again. One after another, all reminders of the so-called magician faded from his phone.

Feeling suddenly productive, he eased out of bed. A shower and breakfast would be the perfect way to start this already great morning.

A knock on his apartment door interrupted him. He smiled again

as he quickly threw on some gym shorts. He was wrong. Brooke returning would be *the* perfect way to start the morning. She had probably just gone to get coffee or something.

Elijah opened the door. “Well, well, well, back for m—”

It wasn’t Brooke Alarawn standing in front of him, but rather a tear-stained Willa Weil.

“We need to talk.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX



ELIJAH STARED AWKWARDLY at Willa for what felt like an hour before finally stepping aside to let her in.

She stepped over the threshold and into the foreign apartment. Spartan arrangements were typical for the life of the traveling scholar, but the barren room made her feel empty. Not knowing exactly what to do, she found a seat on the overstuffed couch.

An empty bottle of whiskey and two tumblers sat on the table. A boozy remnant had congealed on the bottom of the glasses. Willa eyed red lipstick on one of them. Elijah, following her stare, swept the glasses up with one hand and walked toward the kitchen.

His phone buzzed as he re-entered the room, but he ignored it. “What are you doing here?” he asked, covering the strange burns across his body as he pulled on a wrinkled shirt.

For all the historian’s faults, he knew how to ask a good question. What was she doing here?

After finding Sean’s body, Willa fled the boathouse, trying to put as much distance between her and the river as possible. The two guards were gone—which was probably for the best considering what she wanted to do to them—and there was no evidence that she could find connecting her student to whoever had done that to him.

So, she called the police from one of the few remaining pay phones in the city, leaving an anonymous tip about a murder. Then she hung up and just walked.

She pounded pavement through the night, mind barely registering her direction. She just let her feet carry her, leading where they would.

Eventually, they brought her here.

Willa had few friends, had let few people into her life. But she needed someone, anyone to talk to. And some part of her hoped that Elijah would understand.

“My student...the one I was looking for. He’s dead.”

Elijah stared down at her, his face unreadable. Doubt? Guilt? Fear? What did she expect? He didn’t know her at all, didn’t owe her anything. She considered leaving, but before she could, he joined her on the couch and gave her the most awkward hug ever.

“I’m so sorry, Willa.”

She tensed, then eased into him. The consolation was surprisingly needed, and she began to cry again, her story spilling out between the sobs.

They sat like that for a while until his phone vibrated against the coffee table. Willa jumped and pulled away. She thought about the shade of lipstick on his glass. “Sorry...for dumping that all on you. You should get that,” she said as it buzzed again.

“It’s fine,” he said, but he reached for the phone anyway. His face went pale as he read the message. He showed it to Willa. It was from Chem.

URGENT. Something’s up re: ur blood. Need to meet ASAP. Don’t dick around on this. Find the poet—she won’t answer my calls, but she needs to see this too.

Willa instinctively reached for her phone before remembering that she left it at home before heading out on her hunt.

Elijah was staring at her like he had the morning he woke up in her apartment, when she told him the truth about her powers. Willa thought he would bolt again, but whatever confusion raged inside of him, this time it was mixed with resolve.

She could see it in his eyes.

“Okay,” he finally said. “Let’s have it *all* out.”

“Elijah you don’t have to—” She aimed for sympathy, but her voice bordered on exasperation.

“Stop,” he said. “I don’t know what’s happened to me, but it is becoming clear that we’re connected by this. By my change. It’s time we to stop messing around and get to the truth.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN



“MA’AM, YOU JUST NEED to calm down and think this over. We don’t know what that could do. It could be dangerous.” He glanced down at the small glass vile held in her trembling hand. The one he just delivered to her.

A single pulsating vein stood out from Brooke’s forehead an eighth of an inch. It was her tell, and it only revealed itself when she had a hand to play. Rex tried to dissuade her, but his words had the opposite effect. She wanted danger. She *needed* danger.

“No time to think, Rex. Just get me there. Get me there now.”

He licked his lips and stepped on the gas. “All right. But busting in there isn’t going to do a thing.”

“If what Laurie texted me is true, it’s already done. Now stop talking and start driving.”

Her assistant called her minutes ago, confirming Brooke’s suspicions. The entire board of Alarawn Industries had just shown up at PPG Tower.

It could only mean one thing.

Last night, Brooke had resigned herself to that fate—of losing her company, losing what control she had. She had made peace with it, almost felt elated by the idea.

But everything changed when she saw Elijah’s file.

Project Cold Steel was meant to save AI and give her the persuasive power she needed to turn this company around. She had trusted the historian to do his job, opened up to him in a way she hadn’t done with anyone since her parents had died.

But he betrayed her. Instead of researching her company, he was off playing Dungeons and Dragons with his friends. He was a fraud and a liar.

But he had found something of use—unlocked something strange. A new kind of power that Brooke could use. She couldn’t erase the image of the fiery creature from her mind. With that kind of power, she could save her company. Save the city. And Elijah kept it to himself.

Rex threaded the needle between two cars going the opposite direction as he sped down Stanwix Street. Horns blasted from every

direction. She should have been nervous, but Brooke's mind fixated on something else.

Someone else.

Van Pelt.

He wouldn't listen to reason, wouldn't listen to her pleas for mercy, wouldn't listen to virtue. Strength was all he heard.

Brooke turned the smooth glass vial over in her palm, watching the deep blue fluid as it slid from one end to the other. A gift from Elijah, procured by Rex. She smiled. She had a new form of strength. She had seen what it could do on Mount Washington.

She would see what it could do to Van Pelt.

Rex stared at her through the rear-view mirror. Something hungry on his face. But she ignored it, trusting that he had her back.

Making it from Squirrel Hill to downtown in nine minutes flat, he ran the Lincoln up onto the curb directly in front of the PPG Tower's massive glass doors.

Without a word, she stepped from the car and toward her destiny.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT



BROOKE ALARAWN SHOVED through the boardroom doors with the strength of a heavyweight, startling the collection of suits inside.

“Eight months. You gave me eight months—and now this.”

“Ms. Alarawn, this is a closed meeting.” Van Pelt tugged at his collar. “You need to leave before we call security.”

Brooke laughed. “Who? My security? You’re going to ask my security to come and take me away?”

A man with a soft face at the end of the table stood. “Brooke, please. Don’t make this worse for yourself. Your father wouldn’t want things to end this way.”

“Smitty, you ought to be ashamed of yourself,” Brooke spat at the man. “My dad would take you out back and kick your ass if he knew what you were up to.”

The man stared at an invisible dot on the table. “Would he?” the man whispered.

Van Pelt grew an inch and stepped toward her. “Your father is the one who started all of this, Brooke. He put us here to make these kinds of calls—he trusted us to make the right decisions. This is the company’s process.”

“*Fuck* the process. He was desperate. Desperate men make mistakes. This is my damn company, and I have time left to turn it around.”

“I’m sorry,” Van Pelt said, though it was clear that he was anything but. “We voted to amend the agreement. It was three to four. With a majority vote, the board is taking full control of Alarawn Industries. We discussed keeping you on to be the,” Van Pelt cleared his throat, “pretty face, but that was voted down as well. You’ll be receiving a severance package large enough to buy the Hill District. Graciously step down and go enjoy yourself. Have some kids, for God’s sake.”

Brooke slammed her fist on the table. Everyone—except Van Pelt—jumped. “Who was it? Who sold me out?”

The board stared blankly. She scanned the room, reading guilt in most of the faces. She locked eyes with Fong on the screen. 8,000 miles away and he still looked nervous.

Van Pelt grinned. “You need to leave, Ms. Alarawn. Really. This is

embarrassing.” Van Pelt had regained his cool—as if he held a perfect hand.

“I’m not leaving until I know who voted against me. You owe me this!”

Van Pelt’s grin turned into a wolf’s snarl. “I owe you *nothing*, Brooke. Nothing.”

Brooke’s response was cold as ice. “You cowards.”

“It was me, Brooke. I was the deciding vote.”

A freight train ran through her head. She turned toward the slight man at the end of the table.

“Vince?” Her tone pleaded.

The man stood. His eyes glassed over. “Brooke, I have a fiduciary duty to our shareholders. I take that seriously. A duty to this company—to this city. I took another look at the books, and it was impossible. You couldn’t do it—no one could have. I wish you had that kind of power, but we need to salvage what we can, and that can’t wait any longer. Fong has a deal with the Chinese that won’t last.”

Her eyes were frozen daggers aimed at her father’s best friend. “Vince, you told me you were in. You had my back.”

Vince Charles’ Adam’s apple rose in slow motion, then sank. A tear broke from a glassy eye, its trajectory halted by the wireframe of his glasses. “This is having your back, Brooke. Someday, maybe a long time from now, you’ll understand.”

Brooke scanned the room, looking at each board member in the eye. “You’ll pay for this.”

Van Pelt started to laugh. “How pathetically cliché. Just when are we going to pay, Brooke? Huh? We’ve been paying our dues for years. And all you’ve done is continue to drag your daddy’s company down. And for what? Pittsburgh?” He paused, waiting for her to look up. “*Fuck* Pittsburgh, Brooke. It’s just a burned-out has-been of a city. It’s finished. Just like the Alarawn family. And we’re finally laying that family to rest. You just need to take a deep breath and calm down.”

Brooke walked toward the door and pulled it open. She stood at the threshold and stared into the hallway. Rex was standing there, waiting for her. He was the only family she had left. The only one who stood by her.

Snapping open her handbag, she withdrew the plastic vial. A blue liquid splashed about within.

Without turning around, she spoke. “I won’t calm down, Lance. In fact, I think anger is exactly what this moment calls for. After all, it’s the hottest fires that forge the coldest steel.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE



THE IKEA CLOCK READ 7:04—almost an hour before Elijah was supposed to meet Willa and Chem at the bar. After the poet left, the afternoon had been largely unproductive. His mind, occupied by fantasy, couldn't make sense of the facts.

He turned toward his bathroom and flicked on the harsh overhead light. The tile floor was pleasantly cool on his bare feet. Elijah took off his button-up and gingerly pulled the white tee over his head. The motion was less painful than before. Evidence that his wounds were healing quickly.

He surveyed his battered body in the bathroom mirror.

What the hell?

The most curious aspect of his injuries was the large burn centered on his upper torso. It had been healing for days, a pattern slowly emerging. Staring at himself in the mirror, its origin now became clear.

An intricate scar, a square with two intersecting ovals, was branded onto his body. It was a perfect facsimile of Thomas Alarawn's medallion. Elijah's stomach turned. He ran his index finger over the distinct, symmetrical design—its harsh lines aggressively displayed in the fluorescent light.

The same symbol that burned on the monster's chest.

Elijah shook his head. Any shred of doubt left in his mind, any corner of denial he could cling to melted away.

He walked toward his nightstand with the intent of bringing his notes with him to the bar. It was time to lay all of his cards on the table and hope that Willa and Chem would do the same.

Elijah opened the drawer and reached for his file, but it was gone. Pulling the drawer from the table and dropping it on the floor, he looked back into the empty space hoping he had somehow missed it. Nothing. The historian scoured the room, desperate but unable to uncover the missing notes and the medallion.

His mind spun. No one else was in here except for...

Brooke? Shit.

He imagined what she would think, staring at his notes. Little more than the scrawlings of a madman. Would she believe him? Blame

him? Laugh in his face?

The thought of her slipping out this morning without a word now filled him with dread. He grabbed his phone and opened the contacts, scrolling to Brooke's name. The call went straight to voicemail.

"Shit." He looked at the clock again. Brooke would have to wait until after his meeting with the professors. Maybe they could give him advice. He jumped in the shower, telling himself there was little danger of Brooke having the file.

But he knew he was playing in self-deception.



BROOKE ALARAWN HAD dominated Elijah's thoughts on the ride across town. One moment he pictured her with the medallion, the next entangled in his sheets. It was safe to say that their relationship was more than complicated.

Turning the corner toward the bar, his thoughts transitioned from Brooke to Willa. What was she searching for in all of this? He could still see her sitting there, crying on his couch. And he couldn't help but feel guilty. She had asked for his help, and he refused.

Now her student was dead.

It was easier when he could blame her—chalk this whole thing up to her manipulating him for her own twisted pleasure. Because if she was telling the truth, bigger things were afoot in Pittsburgh than just him and the monster that had taken residence in his body.

Elijah gave his shirt a fresh tuck before pulling open the door.

Universal bar smell punched him in the face as he stepped into the smoky haze.

Sal's was nearly empty. Tuesday nights were generally slow, but in a college town, there was no telling how many people would skip the cafeteria in favor of cheap drink specials and greasy bar food.

Willa sat at the far end of the room, a martini glass her only companion. She pushed a lonely olive around the bottom of the glass with a swizzle stick. With her chin resting on her fist, she looked like a tired caricature of the depressed woman alone at the bar.

The image struck him, and his guilt returned.

"Come here often?" Elijah asked. He slid onto the empty stool next to her.

Black rings hung under swollen eyes. The historian could feel her hurt. The boy obviously had meant something to her. "Hey, Eli-sha," she said, lightly slurring his name. "Welcome to the party."

They looked out over the bar, the local sports game *du jour* filled the silence between them.

Elijah's hand landed on her back and slid up and down. There was nothing sexual about it. This was a wake, not a date—and any song playing from the jukebox was an elegy for some kid he had never met.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and he meant it.

“You didn’t know,” she said shaking her head slowly. “I mean, I tried to tell you, but I can’t blame you for not knowing. I’m sure waking up in my apartment and hearing me go on about magic and monsters is not the best sell.”

“Don’t forget that I was butt naked.”

“I couldn’t forget that if I tried.” She laughed, and it seemed as unexpected to her as it was to him. “I mean, your junk is literally seared into my brain.” She slowly tapped the side of her head with her index finger.

Elijah laughed too, but the screeching sound of steel on tile interrupted the moment. Chem perched himself on the stool on the other side of Willa. “I guess they let anybody in here on a Tuesday night,” he said with a grin. “Sorry about Sean, Will. You did all you could.”

The smile left her face, and she went back to playing with the olive in her drink. “I just keep asking myself why? He was just some innocent kid. What did he have to do with any of this?”

“You never really know people,” he said, popping a handful of peanuts into his mouth. “Like our boy E here. What do we really know about him?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Elijah shot back. Based on Chem’s text, he assumed the man had come here to talk through whatever the hell was rushing through his veins. By Chem’s tone now, it sounded like he was trying to pick a fight.

“Oh, nothing. Except you seem to be the common denominator in all of this shit. And don’t forget Willa’s man in the mask seemed awfully interested in you. Maybe you know more than you’re letting on. Maybe you’re working with this creep. I mean, we still don’t know what made you go all Red Hulk in the first place. It wasn’t Willa’s mumbo jumbo. It wasn’t my science. But someone’s been messing with us, which means they’ve got a motive. If I was a gambling man, I’d put my money on the bad guy being the mysterious out-of-towner historian with the secret research job.”

“Screw you,” Elijah said, although he had to admit that Chem did have a point. Somehow Alarawn Industries had to be tied into all of this. But we weren’t about to concede that. “For all I know you’re the one who’s behind it all. You’ve got mysterious research of your own going on—and from where I’m sitting, you seem remarkably interested in me as well. What’s your angle?”

Chem laughed, but to Elijah, it seemed like a dodge. “Yeah, yeah, blame the black guy.”

“Wait,” Willa said, suddenly alert. The men turned toward her. She grabbed Chem’s arm as if to keep him from running away. “You said ‘us.’ What does that mean? ‘Someone’s been messing with us.’ What

happened to you?"

Chem hesitated, then pulled a laptop from his bag and opened it on the bar. "I'll show you what happened to me."

Grainy, black-and-white security footage filled the screen.

"Are they still making those Paranormal movies?" Elijah asked.

"It's my lab. And apparently, something crazy went down there last night, while all the little boys and girls were tucked in their beds."

Chem hit play, and Willa's mouth dropped open, just slightly.

"That's him. That's the man I've been chasing."

Elijah leaned closer, taking in the moving image of the large man. Elijah could feel that he knew him, could remember the twisted face of the mask staring down at him as he fell. His skin crawled, and a pit formed in his stomach.

As they stared at the computer, the figure on the screen used a crowbar to bust open a lockbox of some kind as if were made of aluminum foil. He pulled out something small and placed it in a bag.

"What did he take?" Willa asked.

Chem paused the video. He rubbed his hands over his face and then over his hair. "You two aren't going to like this." He nodded in the direction of Elijah. "You better keep an eye on Rage Against the Machine, Willa."

Elijah's face grew warm. He had no idea where this was going, but he already knew it wasn't good. "What the hell did you do?"

Getting off his stool and taking a step back, Chem leaned against the stainless-steel wall. He put himself in a corner, whether defensive or submissive, Elijah wasn't sure. "It was your blood, Elijah."

"My *what*? You gave them my blood?"

Chem laughed. "First of all, I didn't *give* them anything, he took it. Secondly, it wasn't *exactly* your blood. Well, it started that way, but I...I made some adjustments."

Willa took a step toward the chemist as if she might strike him before Elijah got a chance to. "You're messing with powers you know nothing about, Percy. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about fat stacks, maybe the cover of *Time*. You know, what all three of us are here for. Fame. Money. Prestige. Hell, I'd be happy with healthcare. You two would have done the same thing in my situation."

The chemist seemed sincere, but Elijah couldn't fight the suspicion there was a lie sprinkled in with the truth. But now wasn't the time. He placed his hand on Willa's shoulder as if to hold her back. Looking at Chem, he asked, "What can it do?"

"If I was successful? It could be the fountain of youth"

"And if you weren't?"

"It *could* turn that guy into you."

Elijah felt Willa's shoulder stiffen. Her sudden fear was the most convincing piece of evidence he had yet to see.

"Just like him?" Willa asked.

Chem wrung his hands and then jammed them into the pockets of his jeans. "No. Not exactly. I mean, it's untested. But the plan was to enhance it. I added a stabilizing element. Give the user more control over the turning. The plan was to isolate the healing elements. But—"

"But what?" Willa asked, voice raised.

"Well...I wasn't exactly done with it. If someone were to take it as is right now? I'd run like hell in the opposite direction."

Willa sat back down. Elijah could only imagine what she was thinking.

"There's more," Chem said, then pressed play on the video.

Elijah watched as the large man turned to leave the lab, but something stopped him. He paused, then turned toward the camera. With one swift motion, he pulled the mask from his face, as if he wanted to be seen.

There, staring straight at them, was Rex Bertoldo.

"Holy Shit," Elijah grunted.

"You know him, don't you?" Chem asked, clearly pleased that his assumptions were true.

Willa's anger flared again. "Who is he, Elijah?"

"That's my boss's muscle, Rex. That guy," Elijah pushed his finger against the screen as the realization set in, "was there for my first blackout."

Then as he spoke another memory came to mind, one much older. An ancient mill, a burning cauldron. A large bald man staring him in the eyes as he pulled the lever. Molten steel raining down around Elijah. But it wasn't Elijah's body. Wasn't Elijah's memory.

Strange words played on Elijah's lips, but they weren't his words. "*Rana te ljuta zapala.*"

"We have to stop him," Willa said, ignoring his curse. "He killed Sean. I know it. He's behind whatever the hell happened to you. He's got something planned, and whatever it is, it can't be good."

"Like hell we do. I'm planning on getting the hell out of dodge. I mean, can you even find that rat bastard?" Chem asked. "Willa said the guy can go all ghost protocol whenever he wants to."

Elijah looked up at them as a dark truth struck him. "I know where he is. He's with Brooke."

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE



LIGHTS SHIMMERED IN every direction throughout PPG Place. While Oakland was King's home, he considered downtown his retreat—especially during the winter months. Leaning against a giant concrete planter, he took in his surroundings. The square was walled in by the glass of the large PPG buildings. Their spires cast a cyberpunk vibe over the complex. An ice rink rivaling Rockefeller Center sat in the center of the square.

The sound of laughter swept out across the ice and echoed off the glass walls. King was in an urban disco ball.

Not seeing any cops, he lit his bowl and took a long hit. Almost instantly, the scenery became more dreamlike. He closed his eyes and exhaled. A woman, with a child in tow, passed through his cloud and gave him a sideways glance.

"Evening, ma'am. Sorry to disrupt your experience."

She pulled her kid closer and double-timed it toward the rink. If people viewed him as a homeless man in Oakland, they treated him like a criminal downtown.

"Hey, King."

Standing just off to his left was a wiry kid of thirteen or fourteen. His puffer jacket was a well-worn hand-me-down, still a size too big.

King pocketed his pipe and smiled at the boy.

"Marcus. What's up, little man?"

"Not much. Gramma's takin' us skating."

"Oh, yeah. Where's she at?" King scanned the crowd looking for Roberta.

"She's over there." Marcus raised an overstuffed arm. King assumed he was pointing, though his hand was swallowed by the jacket. "Laquisha's having a fit—thought I'd take a walk."

"I hear that. How's school doing? You getting all As?"

"B in science, but otherwise, top of my class."

"That's my man," King said. He held out a fist and Marcus returned a parka-covered fist-bump.

As King turned away from the boy, he was nearly knocked over by a couple sprinting for the doors of PPG Tower. "Whoa, settle down folks," he yelled, more playful than angry. "What's the rush? It's not

like it's the end of the world.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO



ELIJAH SWEEPED HIS CREDENTIALS through the card reader; the doors of PPG Tower clicked open. Brooke never responded to his text message, and calls were still going straight to voicemail. Luckily, her assistant was on call, and she confessed that Rex had delivered Brooke to the office for an emergency session with the board.

Whatever Rex was planning, Elijah hoped that they weren't too late.

The poet and the historian b-lined for the front desk. They had parted ways with Chem at the bar. If they were really running into the mouth of some super-villain, the chemist really had no business joining them. When he said their goodbyes, Elijah could hear the gravity—the responsibility—in his voice.

Elijah smiled at the night guard and pushed his hand through his hair. "How's it going?"

The pimply-faced kid couldn't have been over twenty. "Hey. You one of Alarawns?"

"Yeah," Elijah said. "Crazy time of the year—board meetings and all. Everybody upstairs?"

The guard nodded. He looked as excited as a ten-year-old boy at a Broadway musical. "They've been in and out all day. Busy as hell. Guess that's the price of the big leagues."

Elijah gave a courtesy laugh. Willa stood frozen at his side.

"Sure is." He paused. "Did Mr. Bertoldo arrive yet?"

"I can't tell you that. Company policy," the guard said. "But I can't stop you from looking at the sign-in list." The kid grinned and spun a clipboard in Elijah's direction.

Elijah printed his name directly under Rex's. The man had been in the building for just under thirty minutes.

Turning to Willa. "Rex has a head start. He's up there with Brooke already."

The poet nodded and sped toward the elevators. "I'm sure she's fine." But by the way, Willa was walking, he could tell she was lying.

"Thanks," Elijah said trying to match her long strides.

Despite it being the middle of the evening, it took forever for one of the dozen or so elevators to open. The two stepped in and Elijah

pushed the button for the thirty-eighth floor. The lift hummed and began its ascent, their eyes glued on the numbers. Nearing the twentieth floor, the elevator jostled, and the lights flickered. Willa lurched for the wall to steady herself.

After a pause and a cough, the tiny box continued its upward trajectory.

"That's not creepy at all," Elijah said, faking a smile. It did nothing to ease the tension. Willa seemed in her own world.

"You don't have to do this, you know. You have a choice."

She looked up at him like he had just said what she was thinking.

"What do you mean?"

"Brooke isn't yours to save. And Rex, he's not your burden. You did what you could to save your student, you don't need to avenge him. You could just...I don't know. Go home."

She shook her head. "I made my choice. Whatever it takes, he's going down. Tonight."

Elijah nodded. "Well, I would be lying if I said I wasn't glad you're here. It's nice to not be alone. For my sake and Brooke's."

"What's with you two anyway?"

Elijah looked away. "Who? Me and Brooke? She's my boss."

The young professor faced forward. She pressed him, "There's more though, right? I don't know many people who'd risk what you're risking to save their boss."

Elijah felt flushed. The elevator eased to a stop and opened into the Alarawn offices, and he exhaled, glad to dodge her questions. "Let's go."

The front desk was empty, and the entire floor was covered with an electric twilight from auxiliary lamps on the walls. Something had knocked out the primary lighting. The temperature seemed to have dropped twenty degrees.

"Something's not right here," Willa said.

"You can say that again."

The pair stepped through the office, its open floor plan eerie in the darkness. The common workspace was a ghost town. A noise echoed from the executive suite. Elijah steadied himself, then followed the sound.

"My. God," Willa whispered. Elijah wasn't sure if her words were an expletive or a prayer. It could have been both.

The boardroom was as cold as a meat locker—and just as bloody.

Elijah did all that he could to stifle his gag reflex as he took in the body count. Five souls, as far as he could tell, had expired in the room. Their corpses were in various states of dismemberment. Most were huddled close to the door—as if they held hope in escape.

An arm lay on the floor at his feet.

Chairs were scattered throughout. The dark oak table, half the size of the room, was split through the middle. A portrait of Thomas Alarawn lay torn on the carpet.

Gurgling came from across the room. A slight black man lay in a corner alone, impaled in the chest by the splintered rod of wood. Blood trickled from his mouth. Fluttering eyelids exhibited the thin thread of life remaining in what would soon be lifeless flesh.

Elijah raced to his side. He crouched close enough to the man that he could nearly feel his bloody breathing.

“...monster...”

“Quiet. I can help you, we’ll get you out of here,” Elijah said. He placed two hands on the shaft in his stomach.

“No...Brooke...” The man’s face went blank. A final cough brought his ragged breathing to a halt. Lifeless brown eyes stared off into an eternal nowhere.

Elijah counted bodies. Not seeing Brooke amid the carnage, he exhaled.

“We have to stop him,” Willa said, without looking at Elijah.

“We need to call the police. Look at this place? Do you think we stand a chance against Rex? What are you going to do, quote some Shakespeare and make him disappear? You’re not exactly equipped for this kind of thing.”

“Maybe not,” Willa said. She turned to face the historian. “But you are.”

“Me?” Elijah shrieked. “You’re out of your mind. Rex could snap me in half *without* Chem’s enhancements.”

“Maybe as you are now. The other you would stand a chance. Your monster could stop him.”

Elijah paced the boardroom, stepping over bodies and broken furniture.

“Me and him, the monster, we kind of had a falling out. And besides, it doesn’t exactly work on command. I don’t know if I can do it.”

Willa smiled and said, “You will. You’re here for a reason, Elijah.”

He stared at her, wondering if the poet was still drunk. But her eyes held nothing but the truth. She believed everything she said.

It almost made him believe it too.

“What if I turn into that thing, and I only make things worse? You said it yourself, it almost killed you.”

She placed her hand on his arm. “I don’t know how to explain it, but even when I thought it was going to kill me, I could still sense your presence inside of it. Like you were fighting it. Maybe it’s time to stop fighting against it and start fighting with it.”

A shout from another office halted their conversation. Willa ran

toward the noise, leaving Elijah no choice but to follow.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE



HALFWAY DOWN THE EXECUTIVE corridor, Elijah saw a large door swing open.

“Right on time.” Rex’s face was twisted in a snarl.

“We know what you’ve done, Rex.”

Rex’s snarl turned into a smile. “Okay, detective, you’ve got me.” Rex raised his hands, palms out toward Elijah and Willa. “You going to take me to the precinct for booking?”

“Where is she?”

“Who?” Rex asked in a sincere tone that knocked Elijah off-center.

“Brooke. What have you done to her?”

“Done to her?” The man laughed again. “The question is: What did I do for her?”

Rex took two quick steps and positioned himself between Elijah and the boardroom.

Elijah surveyed the man, trying to determine if he’d been changed—a transformation that might have been catalyzed by Chem’s serum.

Rex cracked his knuckles. “I’ll give you one chance to turn and leave. You can consider this a termination of employment,” he said, looking at Elijah.

Whether it was anger or the thought of Brooke being in trouble, Elijah felt a new courage course through him.

“I don’t work for you, dipshit. But when I tell Brooke what you’ve done—”

Rex’s laughter interrupted Elijah’s threat. “I’ve done nothing but give her what she’s always wanted. True power.”

Elijah heard a quiet mumbling. Willa’s lips moved—her eyes dilated.

The historian cursed to himself. It looked like he was alone in this. He hoped Willa was sane enough to dial 911.

He took a step toward Rex. “Let me pass.”

“Over my dead body,” Rex said. “You don’t stand a chance here, historian.”

Elijah made a fist with his right hand. The last punch he’d thrown was against Caleb Boyer in the eighth grade. Twenty years hadn’t improved his form. Rex blocked with his left arm, and countered with

a quick, but brutal, right to Elijah's gut.

The ox put barely any effort in, but when his massive fist landed in Elijah's stomach, it knocked all the wind out of him. Elijah collapsed to the floor. Rex reached down and grabbed him by the shirt.

"I've been wanting to do that since the day I met your uppity ass." Saliva and hate shot across Elijah's face.

Rex lifted him as though he were weightless and heaved his body over a cubicle divider. Elijah landed with a crash.

The world spun.

"It's your turn, bitch." Rex stepped toward Willa.

Elijah, dazed but still conscious, could see her lips moving—the words came in a whisper. As the man approached, she closed her eyes and raised one hand toward him. With steady syncopation, the words got louder.

*"Wild words wander here and there; God's great gift of speech abused
Makes thy memory confused:*

But let them rave."

Whether it was pure light or color, Elijah couldn't be sure, but something coursed from Willa's hand and landed in the center of Rex's torso. The man paused, then stumbled backward. He shook. Sweat broke out on his face.

Whatever was happening, it wasn't enough. Rex slammed a fist against his chest in some kind of primordial warrior salute and stepped again toward the poet.

Willa was unfazed. It might have been his imagination, but Elijah thought he saw the poet smile.

She closed her eyes and started again. This time at full volume: "A mark in every face I meet,

Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,

In every infant's cry of fear,

In every voice, in every ban,

The mind-forged manacles I hear."

Rex froze. Then, grabbing his head, he dropped to one knee and then dropped onto his side.

Elijah climbed out of the smashed bits of office furnishings to join Willa. The fair-skinned woman was paler than he had ever seen her.

He glanced at Rex. The man's eyes were open—they followed their every move—and were filled with rage. A line of drool leaked from the side of his mouth.

Willa kicked him square in the face.

"That should hold him for a while."

Her powers were real. Elijah knew that now. But he couldn't be sure if he was terrified or relieved.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

Willa raised her hands again. A strange look crossed her face. Rage mixed with glee.

“I have a few ideas,” she said.

Before she could put those ideas into action, a scream echoed from the executive suite.

“Brooke!” Elijah shouted. He grabbed Willa’s hand and pulled her away from the comatose man toward the sounds of fear and pain.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR



CHEM TORE ABOUT LIKE a madman, grabbing anything of value and shoving it into his bag. Shit was about to go down out there, in the real world beyond the four walls of the lab, and Chem knew that no one in the city would be safe.

He glanced over his shoulder at the clock ticking away on the wall. Forty-five minutes had passed since he'd left his friends, and if the city wasn't on fire yet, he'd be surprised.

"It's not my fault," he said over and over again to the empty room, and there was some truth to it. He didn't create Elijah, he didn't ask for his shit to be stolen. And yet, the Vida Serum was his baby. It bore his fingerprints. And it was currently in the hands of a madman.

"OK, so it's a little bit my fault. But there's nothing I can do about it now."

Superpowers or no superpowers, Chem always considered running headlong toward danger a piss-poor idea. Millions of years of evolution had taught the Western world that the lamb does not chase the lion, it runs like hell the other way. Not because of cowardice, but due to a deep instinctual intelligence. Something born and bred in the survivors.

At that moment, Willa and Elijah were stalking the lion, and Chem could only hope the odds might turn in their favor. But that wasn't his problem right now. If they failed, the lion might be coming back to the lab next. Chem needed to get what he came for and get out.

Sliding open a drawer, he reached in and pulled out a false back, exposing his faithful hiding spot. His fingers felt the cool glass, causing his heart to beat in double time. "There you are!" It was the last vile of Elijah's blood. With it, he could start over somewhere else. Somewhere safe. Science, there lay Chem's strength. Not playing at being a hero.

He thought about Elijah and Willa. Academics. Book nerds for crying out loud, heading straight into the fire.

Superpowers or no superpowers, they weren't exactly the hero types either.

"Shit."

He slid the vial of blood into his black medical bag and turned to

grab the last of what he needed—three syringes full of his patented painkiller and a small supply of soft metal, individually wrapped in plastic bags.

Leftovers from one of Chem's previous failures. He looked at the metal, then made a choice.

He grabbed a glass beaker with a rubber stopper and a half-finished bottle of water from the trash. Then he stormed out of the lab, leaving the door open behind him. The laboratory had treated him well over the years, but odds were his current trajectory would never lead him back here.

It was an easy sacrifice to make.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE



THE ENORMOUS DOUBLE doors at the end of the executive hall blocked their advance. Brooke was in there. Elijah knew it. He prayed that she was okay, that Rex hadn't hurt her, but based on the sounds pouring out from within, someone was clearly in pain.

"I hope you've got some healing words as well," he said to Willa.

The look she gave him was far from comforting.

He reached for the giant handles. They were cold enough to burn. Ignoring the pain, he pushed into the CEO's office.

Across the room, an older man in a suit lay flat on the mahogany executive desk. Brooke Alarawn leaned over him. She kept him pinned with a knee on his chest. Her hands were wrapped around his throat—squeezing away his existence.

Her eyes were blue fire, and a thin layer of ice encased her body, like a windshield on a Pittsburgh winter morning. Her hair, a wild mane, encircled her head in a dark halo.

It was Brooke, not Rex that had taken the serum. The monster was real, and she had been in his bed not long ago.

"Brooke. No," Elijah yelled.

The prostrate executive's head rolled to the side. Elijah couldn't tell if he was alive.

Brooke stared at them like an untamed beast. She was small, but nevertheless terrifying. The intensity in her voice matched the intensity of the ice encasing her. "What are you doing here?" she snarled.

"We came here to save you...but...the board room...what have you done?"

Brooke vaulted off the desk like a practiced gymnast. Her body nimble, she glistened as she walked toward them. "I don't need saving. I *am* the Savior. And now that I have your blood coursing through my veins, I'll be able to save the city and everyone in it."

Elijah tried to make sense of what he was hearing. Seeing her in this new form was too much.

"My father didn't have the strength to do what was required—wasn't strong enough for twenty-first-century steel. Thanks to him, this son of a bitch," Brooke gestured back to the figure on the desk,

“could take everything from me. They’re going to take it all, break it into bits, and ship it overseas. That can’t happen. Pittsburgh needs this place.”

“Brooke, let him go. He knows what you are. I don’t think you’re gonna have any problems with him or his people for a long, long time.”

Brooke Alarawn let out something between a shriek and a laugh. She walked back to her victim and ran a fingertip from his hairline down to the tip of his nose and across his lips. Her hand landed on his neck. “Don’t be so naïve, Elijah. The world doesn’t work like that. Sure, you can run off to your library when this is all over, but what about me? What about Alarawn Industries? What about Pittsburgh?”

As Brooke spoke, the coat of ice covering her body solidified, thickening before his eyes. The temperature in the room continued to drop. Elijah’s thoughts turned to the scene in the adjoining boardroom. He pictured his own body, broken and scattered around the Alarawn office like knick-knacks from a deranged Hallmark store.

Every fiber of his being told him to flee, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t just leave her. At her core, Brooke Alarawn was good. Kind. Noble. He had seen that. She had been perverted by the slanted blood that ran through his own body. The girl sipping whiskey and smoking a cigarette on his balcony was who she really was. He could help her. Bring her back. That was all he knew. All he cared to know.

“I get it, Brooke,” Elijah said. “You’ve given all to this city—for these people. They don’t understand, and they probably never will.” He caught a glance of Willa out of his peripheral vision. A “what the hell are you doing?” look had come over her face.

“If you’re going to make a difference, it can’t be like this. You lost it in there—which I can understand—but we need a plan. We’re going to need to clean up the mess, figure out a way forward. We can do this together. We’re made for this.”

The room warmed, just a little.

Brooke’s shoulders relaxed.

“You believe me?” she asked. Her face softened, only a little. He could see the longing in her eyes.

“Always,” Elijah said, with the most authentic smile he could muster. “That’s why I came to Pittsburgh. I believed in you, in Alarawn Industries, in this city. I want to be a part of its bright future. Of your bright future.”

Brooke leaned against the table. Her pale skin was visible again through the sheet of ice. She was lost in thought. Elijah held his breath.

“Thank you.” Brooke exhaled. Her eyes still looked animalistic, only a little less so. “With my power—our powers, Elijah—we can

make this city great again.”

Elijah thought they might just make it out of the building alive.

“Bullshit,” Willa screamed at the frozen woman.

“Willa, stop,” Elijah whispered.

But she didn’t. “It was you all along. You killed him. You killed Sean. He was a member of this city. And you had him murdered.”

Brooke looked confused for a moment, but then she simply shrugged it off. “There are plenty of bones beneath this city. They make for a strong foundation.”

Elijah held in a groan. He reached out to grab Willa’s hand, but it was too late. Rage took her, and she charged at Brooke.

Ice on the surface of Brooke’s body thickened and turned deep charcoal gray. The crystalline exoskeleton took all of Brooke’s features and enhanced them. She looked like a champion bodybuilder, her muscles taut, thick, and unyielding. The last parts of her body turned as Willa Weil dove at her. Sidestepping like a master bullfighter, the creature brought down a fist across Willa’s back. The blow altered the poet’s trajectory.

Elijah watched as his friend’s body crumpled on the floor. Willa lay motionless.

“No!” he shouted, but Brooke was unfazed.

“I thought you would help me. Realize my project. But it wasn’t you, it was me all along. I’m the Cold Steel that this city needs.”

Elijah wasn’t sure if it was Alarawn’s words, the sight of Willa’s broken body, or the images of death still fresh from the boardroom, but at that moment there was a catalyst within him. And instead of fighting it, he welcomed it.

“Please help me,” he whispered to the mysterious creature he’d never met.

About damn time, the voice inside responded.

Elijah smiled and opened his arms wide. The change happened nearly instantaneously this time—and he was conscious through it all.

In seconds, Elijah’s form expanded rapidly. He felt pain, but the power covered it. Fire burned in his chest. His thinking gained great clarity. And with him through it all was Gabriel.

No longer were their spirits at odds with one another. Instead, they embraced in perfect harmony that sustained Elijah’s body through the change.

Holding his arms in front of his face, Elijah saw the molten steel as if for the first time. The cracks in his outer layer bled a burning orange-red glow. In a heartbeat, steam filled the room, as fire and ice collided. Condensation covered the windows.

The cold eyes of Brooke Alarawn—or of the creature that was once her—watched the entire transformation.

“Hey, hotshot. You want to dance?” She laughed, looking at her new body. “Looks like your chemist friend improved my batch. Or maybe *I’m* the improvement. No matter. Sadly, for you, I’m ten times your strength.”

Elijah opened his mouth to respond. “*Di do pitchhi, kurva!*” The shock of his alien tongue didn’t slow him. His voice was gravel. “I’ll fight ten times as hard.”

He charged, but the weight of his body was disorienting. His movements were too slow. The ice creature jumped over Elijah’s seven-foot frame and landed on the table behind him. Before he could turn, Alarawn spun and landed a roundhouse kick to the back of Elijah’s head.

Her ice block of a leg connected like a freight train at full-tilt. Elijah felt an impact wave ripple through his body.

Disoriented, he tried to right himself. With a scream, Alarawn launched herself from the table. Elijah threw a sloppy right hook and connected with the creature in mid-air, sending her spinning across the room.

“Stop this, Brooke. This isn’t you. Come back to me, we can manage this together.”

“Brooke is gone. I am the one who will save this city. I am its queen!”

Well, shit, Elijah thought.

Elijah lifted the enormous desk as if it were made of cardboard. He heaved it at her, then followed its path toward the ice monster. She batted away the desk, leaving herself exposed for Elijah’s tackle. He threw himself with all that he had. The two figures hurtled across the room and crashed through a sheetrock wall.

Got her, Gabriel said, but Elijah wasn’t so sure.

He looked down into frozen eyes. With his left hand on her chest, he pulled back to strike a blow he hoped would only knock her out. Before he could, she grabbed the back of his neck and whipped her head into his. The strike sent waves of pain through his molten skull. With a flick of her legs, she threw him back into the office.

Elijah shook his head.

She was getting the best of him, and he knew he wouldn’t win this without finding a way to turn the tables. Brooke was too fast. The tight space was disorienting. He needed room to move, and he needed to get danger as far from Willa’s unconscious body as possible.

Brooke stood between him and the doorway. He needed to find a way to get her out of this room and into the open.

“It’s over, Professor. Even with whatever you have swimming in your blood, you’re finished. You’re a mistake—an accident. I was born for this.”

She held up an arm. In her hand was the Alarawn medallion. Or rather, Gabrijel's medallion. Light danced across the symbol of the *zduhac*, of heroes.

"I thought it was the damned medallion," she said, looking at the object in her hand. "I thought the power was another gift that I inherited. But it's worthless." She squeezed, and the metal disk shattered. Elijah watched it fall to the ground. He could feel the spirit inside him cry at the sight.

But Brooke didn't notice.

"This power that I have, I wasn't born with it. I earned it. I took it. And I will take so much more. Starting with you."

"You want me?" Elijah growled. "Is that what is? You can take me—leave the others out of it."

Brooke licked her lips. "Oh, I'll take you...again. Maybe you'll be more impressive this time." As she spoke, she paced over to the businessman's body. The man winced and groaned—apparently still alive. "But, I'm not giving up anything—for you or anyone. I don't have to."

In front of Elijah's eyes, her arm lengthened, transformed into a perfectly pointed, icy lance.

"No," Elijah yelled.

But his cry had no effect.

"Hey *Lance*," she said. "What was it you said this company needed? Penetration? How does this work for you?"

She drove the pick deep, then withdrew it, seemingly amused by the blood dripping down her arm.

"*Zkapat, kuhda*," the voice within Elijah screamed as he rushed her with everything he had. She raised her spear and struck his side. Piercing cold radiated through his body. But Elijah and the one within him wouldn't stop. His legs churned. Like a linebacker attacking, he lifted her onto his shoulder and drove her—and himself—toward the window.

Time slowed.

The two-inch-thick plate glass gave way, shattering all around them.

The molten monster and the ice queen hurtled out of the thirty-eighth floor of the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Tower and into the dark February sky.



SHATTERING GLASS AND screams replaced the skating rink fanfare. King looked up to see a shower of glimmering shards.

“Get down,” he shouted, flipping Marcus into the concrete planter.

Two figures flew out of the window and into the night sky. They were enormous. One glowed red and the other was shimmering black with a blue haze surrounding it.

A cloud of steam enveloped them as they fell.

“Ho-lee shit,” King said.

It was hard to tell where one body ended and the other began. They tumbled toward the ground in a constant melee—plunging toward the square. Onlookers scrambled to avoid the screaming missiles.

The monsters’ yells drowned out their cries.

The pair spun, sliding down the building’s sheer walls, smashing windows as they fell.

More glass.

More shrieks.

More confusion.

Then the world shook.

King stood motionless, still not believing. He rubbed his eyes. Everything in him shouted, “Run.” Instead, he stepped toward the smoldering mess on the pavement.

Within ten feet of the carnage, the entire sidewalk was cracked. Glass-covered concrete crunched under King’s boots. The creatures lay in a hole of their own creation. He felt a compulsion to investigate the corpses of these fallen angels—or demons.

From two steps away, he saw them for what they were. The larger wasn’t really red, but a dark slate-gray metal—with a fiery glow seeping through cracks in what could only be considered its skin. The other had the form of a woman, but large and jagged with frozen armor covering her body.

The molten monster lifted its head toward the sky and roared.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN



PAPERS CAUGHT IN A cold wind flew in every direction.

Willa lifted her head with a grunt.

Where am I?

It all came back as she took in the remains of Brooke Alarawn's office. She rolled and prepared herself for action. But she was alone. Willa crawled to the broken-out window and peered over the edge. People were running in every direction, away from the spot directly below her. Two figures, prostrate on the ground, were barely visible.

"No. Elijah," she screamed into the wind.



Pushing through a crowd seeking refuge, Willa exited the PPG Tower.

She found Elijah and Brooke—or the creatures that they had become—engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Her mouth dropped as she took in Brooke's form. Though thinner, she was almost the same height as Elijah. Her size was accentuated as dark clouds of condensation and frost surrounded her.

Her strength was surreal. And fast. Damn fast. The storm creature spun Elijah's molten body and slammed him against the glass wall.

He looked like a kid boxer in the ring with a seasoned pro. As Alarawn had him against the wall, she delivered blow after blow. Willa could see his surface ripple in response to her assault. Despite his bulk, there was no way he could sustain this kind of impact. Monster or no monster, Willa was witnessing the destruction of Elijah Branton.

Willa sprinted, positioning herself to the side of the fight. Her mind racing, she searched the small library of poems in her head hoping for something of use. Some were more reliable than others, most seldom worked in her practice space. She cursed herself for focusing her craft on peace rather than war.

She raised her right hand toward the fight, directing it at her friend. Every spell she had cast on him before was meant to calm him. Now she wanted nothing more than to light him up.

*"In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what winds dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?"*

She smiled, awed—even in the midst of battle—at how a poem's meaning could dramatically change with the context.

Power like red heat emanated from her and toward the molten man. Elijah raised his heavy arms, and created a defensive stance, arms absorbing Brooke's assaults.

Willa chanted on.

Frustrated with his renewed strength, Alarawn's creature wound up for a finishing right hook. As her fist arced toward its target, Elijah dodged. The punch landed on the glass wall behind him. It exploded into glittering bits. He countered with a quick but devastating uppercut. His large metal arms powered into Brooke's ribs. Her body bent with the blow. Elijah grabbed the head of the creature and drove it into his alloy knee.

Willa's chant continued. Her energy waned as she sustained the spell. She had to. Had to keep going. Until she was attacked by an unwanted interruption.

"That's enough singing from you, darling."

The voice preceded a blow to the back of her head.

Willa dropped to the glass-covered concrete. She rolled, looking into Rex's eyes.

"You're one tough bitch," he said. "Much stronger than that pup I killed." A smile spread across Rex's face. Blood ran from his freshly broken nose, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Why?" she cried. "Why did he have to die? What was Sean to you?"

"The kid? He was nothing to me. An ant beneath my boot."

"Then why?"

The large man laughed. "For a professor, you aren't very bright. Your student died for one reason, and one reason only. For you. I did it all for you. Because I knew it would bring you out into the open, because I knew it would lead to this. And it worked. His death brought you here, just like I planned. And now you can die just like him."

"Screw you," Willa said, through a grimace. It was a base reaction, but the only one she had. Nothing else made sense. Why would he want her? Do all this for her? She didn't understand, but it didn't matter. His actions were clear enough.

She started to crawl, desperate to get away. She made it only a few feet when she heard the hulking man laugh.

"Well, not *just* like him, I guess." She turned to see him reach

across his body and draw a jagged blade. “We’re going to have some fun first.”

Willa tensed, waiting for the strike, but it never came.

Before he could step forward, something small flew across Willa’s line of sight. She heard glass shatter, then her world exploded.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT



CHEM WATCHED IN HORROR as the giant dickhead who stole his research pulled out a blade, ready to gut Willa where she lay. So Chem did what he did best.

He used science.

On the Uber ride over to PPG Tower, Chem combined what few supplies he had into a makeshift weapon. Leftover cesium from when he put Bill in traction, a thin glass beaker, and water. Those three materials, along with some MacGyver-level knowhow turned Chem's little lab experiment into a homemade grenade.

A grenade he tested out on Rex's face.

The beaker shattered across the creep's large dome head, mixing the water with the cesium. A crack like a cannon shot rang out and the man was instantly wreathed in smoke and steam.

Chem started to shout, but his celebration died in his throat. Rex stepped through the cloud, his thousand-dollar suit torn but his body unharmed. The look on his face screamed murder, and he still held a knife in his hand.

"Shit."

The cesium grenade was a one-off, so Chem reached for his backup. A giant metal wrench that he pinched from a supply closet.

As Rex approached, he swung his weapon with all he could muster. Adrenaline compensated for his physical weakness, and he connected with Rex's knife-bearing hand. The knife rattled on the ground. Rex turned, shaking the pain out of his appendage.

Chem's forehead dripped sweat, even in the terrible Pittsburgh cold. Standing toe-to-toe with the brute, the chemist was four inches taller, but half as wide.

"Somebody else wants to be a hero?" Rex said.

"Better than being an asshole," Chem replied, gripping the wrench more tightly.

Chem's life was a series of events, most of them included him weaseling his way out of trouble. But now, he was determined to go down fighting for the good of humanity. For the good of his city.

Or at least for payback for messing with his experiment.

He took another swing. This time, Rex caught the enormous

wrench in mid-air. In one swift turn, he disarmed the chemist. Without hesitating, Chem grabbed Rex's jacket and thrust his knee upward, targeting Rex's crotch.

But Rex was unfazed. Smiling, the brute plowed his fist into Chem's face. Cartilage crunched.

He dropped to his knees. The night sky faded. Before going completely black, he heard a voice.

"It's my turn, bitch."

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE



WE'RE TOO WEAK.

Willa watched Rex drop Percy with one blow. Brooke had turned the tables again on Elijah. The three had done what they had to. Fate, providence, or chance had brought them to this point, and now their time was running out. Brooke's power was too much. Rex was too experienced, and he fought with an inhuman strength.

Willa considered using the strengthening spell on the chemist, but he was too far gone. Even with enhanced strength, he stood little chance against the bodyguard. Rex was himself a monster. Unlike the guards Willa fought by the river, her poems seemed to have little effect on the brute. She remembered the first night she saw him, the way he dropped three stories and sprinted away after landing. Whatever he was, old tools couldn't stop him.

We need some other way.

Willa placed her hand over her chest and chanted a desperate verse, hoping for a miracle. Four lines in, Willa felt a surge. It was a combination of strength, clarity, and confidence. Everything came into focus. And she knew exactly what she needed to do.

"It's my turn, bitch," she yelled. Then she attacked.

Rex turned from the crumpled mass of Percy's body just in time to see Willa crash into him. The sneer of victory melted from his face. She wondered if he knew—if he could read her new-found strength.

She didn't hesitate. Swinging wildly, her fists collided with his face. She continued her poem, screaming the next lines: "*Her words did gather thunder as they ran, And as the lightning to the thunder Which follows it, riving the spirit of man...*"

Rex was caught completely off guard by the poet's sudden change. Her attack increased as her spell gained momentum: "No sword

Of Wrath her right arm whirl'd,

But one poor poet's scroll, and with 'his' word She shook the world."

Her final line coincided with a final push. Electricity surged from her hands. Rex went sliding across the concrete. The large man gained a knee. He stared at her, his eyes daggers.

"You think your little poems can defeat me?"

Willa slowly lifted her head. Her eyes were unwavering.

“Yes.” Without closing her eyes, she raised both hands in front of her. Connecting the tips of her forefingers and thumbs, she put Rex’s head in the middle of the little triangle.

With confidence, she spoke the word of a different poem. It was simple and honest, and it broke every rule she had ever learned. But at that moment, the words to Sean’s poem made all the sense in the world.

Its power reverberated in the air around her as she spoke.

*“But in this place, I am stronger, under this town I thrive,
through this city my reach grows longer, and with my home I rise.”*

Rex came charging toward her, but Willa merely reached out, her hand touching the chest of Alarawn’s henchman as she spoke the final line.

The concussive force of that contact radiated around her, but Willa held her ground. Rex, on the other hand, was sent soaring, his body finally finding ground thirty feet from its point of departure. The pavement cracked where he landed.

He didn’t move.

Electricity radiated through Willa’s body. She felt like she could scale buildings. Like she could bend steel. Like she could crush bones.

Willa took a step forward.

Her mind was on fire, a savage, swirling force. She thought of Sean’s mangled body. She thought of how right it would feel to end the monster that murdered her student. How good it would feel. It compelled her forward. She wanted to kill him. She needed to kill him. She *would* kill him. It was so clear, her purpose. It gave Willa a high like none she had ever known.

Her grandfather’s words ran through her mind—admonitions not to lose herself, warnings about slippery slopes—but she pushed them aside. She had made her choice.

Violence over fear. Passion over peace. Death over doubt.

There was no other way. She raised a fist high, an executioner’s ax poised to strike.

The sound of shattering glass broke her focus. She turned and looked as the thing that was Brooke Alarawn bore down on Elijah. The historian was nearly finished. For a moment, Willa could see the future terror Brooke could bring down on this city. The pain her power would rain down on the community, on people like Sean. She saw a dead city smothered in cold steel.

And Willa knew that if she let herself go, her magic could bring the same fate.

She turned, dropped her fist, and ran to the chemist’s side.

“You okay?” she asked.

“I’m doing a helluva lot better than our boy over there.” Chem

stood, motioning toward Rex.

Willa looked up, but not at Elijah. She turned and saw that Rex's body was no longer there. But he no longer mattered.

The poet smiled as she gave Chem a hand. "It's nice that one of us studies something useful. Now let's go save this city."

CHAPTER SEVENTY



“JOIN ME, ELIJAH,” THE storm creature said, her arms outstretched toward him. “Look at us. We are gods. If we combine forces, we could do anything. We can right all of the city’s wrongs.”

Elijah leaned against one of the few remaining windows of PPG Place. He was nearly finished. Whatever Chem did to his serum worked far too well. Before he had the chance to consider her offer, a sound came from him. “*Biezh do haaye.*” Elijah rested his metal head against the building.

Laughing, he said, “I’m not sure what that means, but I’m guessing it’s a no.”

Gabrijel stood alongside of him the entire fight. Now his new friend urged him on. The passenger apparently didn’t feel as bad as Elijah did—his resolve was certain.

“You’re a fool. We could have everything.”

“I’m just hoping I get my Subaru back.” He inspected his arms and legs. What once was pristine steel now looked more like scrap metal.

The damage was clear.

“Have it your way,” Brooke said. Clouds gathered in the space above PPG Place. Lightning crashed around them, blinding Elijah. Hail began to fall, pinging off his metal exterior.

Get up, you damned fool, a voice inside his head said. *You can’t just lie there. This is your city.*

“It’s not my city,” Elijah replied.

It is now.

The storm surged as Alarawn roared with blood-curdling laughter. Wind whipped around her, and she rose slowly off the ground. At the sight of Brooke wrapped in a tempest, the heat in Elijah’s body gave out; and his power went with it.

Elijah sank, his hands barely keeping him up.

Out of nowhere, a giant metal wrench landed by his side, clanging. Elijah looked up and saw Willa and Chem come into view through the driving sleet.

Chem nodded, then began searching through a black doctor’s bag. Willa stood tall, her right palm extended in his direction.

“The Human Dress, is forged Iron

The Human Form, a fiery Forge.

The Human Face, a Furnace seal'd

The Human Heart, its hungry Gorge."

Heat rose within his core. The red that showed through the cracks in his steel shell darkened. Smoke burned in his lungs.

She's doing it, he thought. One last chance.

Then the voice returned. *Vstát, Američan. Dej tu děvku peklo.*

Elijah had no idea what the words meant, but they were precisely the pep talk he needed. Standing, he felt his power grow. Shielding his face, he walked into the hail and wind—heading toward their source.

Brooke Alarawn was so enraptured by the storm she was creating, she never saw the wrench coming. It landed with all the force Elijah had on the side of her shoulder. The tool clanged as if he had connected with a steel utility pole. Nevertheless, Brooke dropped to a knee, stunned.

This was the historian's only chance—if he indeed had one. He leapt onto her and straddled her torso. With his burning forearm against her throat, he pushed with the power and rage of generations of workers ruled by the industry. Wild screams of the passenger coursed through his brain.

Her eyes went wide. For a moment, he recognized her as Brooke Alarawn: his boss, his friend, his lover. Struck by the revelation, he eased up just enough, allowing her to land a right-handed blow to his wounded side. Elijah screamed but refused to relent.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE



CHEM, SQUINTING THROUGH the blizzard, crouched over his medical bag. His hands moved fast, but with a certain surety. The scientist in him was disgusted by the rudimentary estimations he was forced to make, but speed was paramount.

He poured the elements into a syringe and stood.

“Keep at it,” he screamed to Willa.

The magician, lost in her trance, didn’t respond.

Half-diving, Chem rolled within arm’s reach of the battle as Alarawn struck Elijah’s side.

Without missing a beat, the chemist lunged. A crack had formed at the base of her neck, just large enough for the hypodermic needle to ease through. Relief settled over him as it sunk into something fleshy.

Chem pushed the plunger.

The creature turned. Its eyes were those of a trapped animal. A frozen arm lashed out at Chem and batted him away like a fly. His body slid across glass and concrete.

Pain shook him, but he looked up anyway. He had to see the experiment through.

This better work.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO



ON THEIR FEET AGAIN, the creatures of fire and ice exchanged blows as the winds whipped through the urban square. Willa's lips continue to move, but her power was quickly slipping away.

The world became hazy and started to darken. No more power went out from the words. They had become impotent—or, more precisely, she had.

Slumping to the ground, Willa landed on her ass, legs crossed. All she could do now was watch the battle play out before her eyes.

Elijah's strength was slipping away.

The tables were turning, and Alarawn had the upper hand once again.

With one final swing, the storm creature connected with Elijah in the chest and sent his large metal mass flying. He collided with the wall of the ice rink and continued through it. The metal body slid across the surface, leaving puddles in its wake.

The creature turned toward Willa and smiled as it strode in her direction. The poet-magician had nothing left. She lifted her arms in a poor attempt at a defensive stance.

Less than five yards away, the creature's gait began to wobble. Six more steps and Alarawn fell, directly at Willa's feet.

She stared at the fallen monster, not believing her eyes. But the thought of Elijah broke her trance. Willa yelled his name and ran to the ice rink.

Through the mist, she came upon the historian's body—not that of the molten man, but Elijah as she knew him. His naked, soft, body was splayed out, motionless on the ice. Smoke seeped from a red scar on his chest.

As she approached, he turned and looked up. "Is it over?"

Willa bit her lip and nodded. "We did it."

She leaned down and took Elijah into a one-arm embrace, taking care with his wounded body.

"You run around naked more than any white guy I've ever met." The chemist's voice echoed around the eerily silent square. "Let's get you out of here."

The heroes limped, holding each other up, out into the littered

grounds.

“It worked,” Willa said, looking up into Percy’s eyes.

“Of course it worked. I’m a *damn* genius.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE



BROOKE'S NAKED BODY lay in the middle of the wreckage, a cast-off doll. A thin layer of ice encased her human form. Her frozen lashes fluttered. She watched as the three academics limped away.

She thought about Alarawn Industries.

She thought about Pittsburgh.

She thought about her family.

Cold coursed through her veins. It enveloped her. The transformation of her bruised body was painful—a pain she relished. It made her angry.

The hottest fires...

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR



HEAVY FOOTSTEPS ECHOED throughout the square.

Elijah turned and saw the creature walking toward them. At its roar, all hope vanished. It was larger than before, its once symmetrical form now jagged and monstrous. The ice was so thick that Elijah couldn't make out what was once Brooke Alarawn's face.

He and his friends could barely walk, let alone fight. He pulled Willa and Chem in close, trying in vain to shield their bruised bodies. It was over. Elijah knew it. But a sense of peace washed over him. In the face of adversity, they did what they could. They didn't run. They fought like heroes.

A brilliant flash blinded him, and when he looked up he couldn't believe his eyes. Between him and Alarawn stood an overweight, bearded man in full academic regalia—cap and all. The gown and white hood flapped in the wind.

The man raised his hands overhead as if to give a benediction.

The creature sprinted at him, snarling and hissing.

The don began to chant:

*"Out of the night that covers me, Black as the pit from pole to pole, I
thank whatever gods may be For my unconquerable soul.*

In the fell clutch of circumstance I have not winced nor cried aloud.

Under the bludgeonings of chance My head is bloody, but unbowed.

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears Looms but the Horror of the
shade, And yet the menace of the years Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the
scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."*

His final line sung, the man let forth a barbaric cry and charged at the giant beast. A massive explosion shook the square. Its power knocked the three professors over.

Willa was the first to her feet.

"Grandpa!" she screamed into the empty night air.

But there was no response. Edwin Weil and the ice creature had vanished.

The hail ceased.

A light snow fell in its stead.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE



THE DESK ON THE FAR side of the room sat empty. Most of the students hardly noticed the absence, but for Willa, it was cloaked in sadness. At times she would glance over, hoping he would mysteriously appear.

But, of course, Sean was gone.

“Poetry continues to teach me, to move me. Each year, I become a different person—the lines are different—they change as I change.”

The basketball player and his doting fans didn’t hear her. A mousy girl in the front row continued taking notes, jotting her own lines of poetry in the margins, but the rest of the class seemed generally numbed to the core. Their disengagement broke Willa’s heart, but they had to find inspiration on their own. Her power wasn’t able to make people love learning. But she had discovered that it was meant for something.

“Our life is filled with choices, and often those choices seem predetermined. Do we work for joy or security? Do we follow art or science? Do we accept war or peace? But if poetry can teach us anything, it’s that there’s always another way, a third choice. We don’t have to hide from this world, but neither do we have to become tainted by it. In this, the lines of the bards are invaluable. I leave you all with a call to life from one of our greats: “Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, Healthy, free, the world before me,

The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

*Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing, Done with
indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms, Strong and content I
travel the open road.”*

The students filed out, most with little more than a nod to the part-time instructor. Their brief foray into the world of verse had ended, and they all had other things to fill their time. Final projects, end-of-the-semester parties, summer job applications. These things took precedence. And for once, Willa could sympathize.

Over the final months, she had realigned her priorities, as well as her expectations. It was time for a change. Time for a new choice.

Willa wouldn’t be teaching in the fall.



Willa pivoted from the counter directly into a customer waiting behind her. Coffee rolled over the lip of her mug and scalded her bare hand.

“Shit.”

“*Déjà vu.*”

A smile spread on Willa’s face as she looked up at Elijah. He looked exhausted but seemed strangely unbothered by that fact.

“Hey,” she said, grinning like a fool.

“It’s really good to see you.”

Since the battle at PPG Place, she had seen Elijah only a few times, and each time he greeted her the same way. She was beginning to believe he meant it.

The poet and the historian found a table near the window. The early May sun warmed her thin frame. She watched Elijah scratch at his chest, at the scar that lay hidden beneath his button up.

“It still bothers you,” she said.

“It still itches, if that’s what you mean. But I wouldn’t say it bothers me anymore. I kind of like it. It reminds of where I’ve come from. And of what I’ve become.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Well, I’ve decided to stay in Pittsburgh. Piece together enough classes to keep food on the table. I’m thinking I can do some good around here.”

Willa’s eyes widened. “You sound like *him.*”

Elijah smiled. After they recovered from the fight, Elijah had told her and Chem all about Gabriel, the ghost that haunted the historian—and how he had departed after that night at PPG Place. “Fulfilled his mission,” was how Elijah had put it. Chem refused to believe any talk of spirits and the beyond. He had mumbled something about believing in science. But it made sense to Willa. She had learned how the past could maintain its grip on the present.

“That’s not the worst thing in the world,” Elijah said. “He taught me a lot. About the importance of taking care of a place. Of really caring. It’s time to stop being so objective, I guess. Get my hands dirty.”

Willa chuckled. “Funny, coming from a historian.”

“If the last couple of months have taught me anything, it’s that history can be personal. It has to be.” He paused. “I’ve also thought a lot about Brooke since that night.”

Willa looked down; her eyes stung. She pictured her grandfather and the monster he died defeating.

“I know it hurts,” Elijah continued. “You won’t believe this, but

Brooke Alarawn was a good person, at least at the start. Her intentions were noble—no matter how misguided. She loved this city, but she just didn't know how to love it, if that makes sense." Elijah paused. "She didn't have the right kind of support. Not like we did. I'll never forget what your grandfather gave for us."

Willa looked up and nodded. "I'm sure it was important for him. Paying back the universe for past missteps, or something like that. 'Invictus.' That last poem he used, I think he meant it for me. I think he wanted me to know that his decision was his own and that we should be free to make our own choices. To not let the failures of others hold us back. I don't think he wanted us to live in guilt."

Though she said it to comfort him, she also knew that it was true. And Willa didn't feel guilty about Edwin's death.

She felt angry.

Rex Bertoldo's body was never found, and Willa couldn't fight the notion that maybe he wasn't the one taking orders from Brooke. That he had been in control all along.

His words haunted her as much as Sean's death. That this was all about her.

Elijah took a sip from his coffee. "So, what about you? What are you going to do now?"

Willa smiled. He always seemed to know what she was thinking. She thought about telling Elijah about The Guild but decided not to worry him. For weeks following the fight, she waited for bearded men in strange robes to descend from the heavens and take her away. But they never showed. Near the end of the semester, a new thought struck Willa. They wouldn't come for her, because they still didn't know about her. Maybe, in Edwin's final act, he not only saved her from Cold Steel, but from The Guild as well. If they looked into the use of new magic, or the commotion caused by her that night, they had no reason to believe it was anything other than Edwin, slipping back into his old vices. In his death, he absolved her of their punishment.

Edwin was wrong, about magic necessarily getting out of hand when she got involved. She knew she could control it, as long as she fought for the city and not for herself. But he was right about one thing—straying from the Canon was far too dangerous. She would paint her own picture going forward, but she'd still color within the lines he had taught her.

"I don't know," she finally answered. "All my life my grandfather guided me. Now I guess I'll have to find my own path."

"Yeah..." Elijah said. "About that."

"What?" Willa looked up at him perplexed.

"Well, it's just that I'm not exactly experienced at all of this."

Having powers and all. And now, with Gabrijel gone, I don't really know what to do. Whatever gift he gave me is still in my veins. Chem's promised to help me find a cure, but in the meantime..."

He left those words hanging, willing her to fill them. But she kept quiet.

"You're really going to make me say it, aren't you?" he asked.

Willa straightened her back. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

Elijah sighed. "If I'm going to do this, and do it well, I'll need some advice. Someone to talk things through with, you know? I'll need—"

"A teacher," she said fighting back a smile.

"Let's call it a *colleague*," he finally answered.

Willa stared down at her coffee. For some reason, Sean's comics came to mind. She looked back up at Elijah.

"So, where do we begin?"



A MAN IN A PERFECTLY pressed suit walked across the main dining room of the upscale, South Side restaurant. He weaved through the kitchen and down a back set of stairs. A low ceiling topped the tight hallway. The air was musty and damp.

Passing storage rooms and racks of foodstuffs, the bald man rapped his knuckles on a solid oak door.

It wasn't a secret knock, nor was it casual.

It demanded entry.

"Come," a muffled voice said from the other side.

The room was nothing like the hallway—ornate and lit with warm, indirect lighting. It had a sweet smell. Deep reds and blacks gave it an air of importance. A pool table and wet bar on one side made it look like some overdone man-cave. *Cribs*, Pittsburgh edition.

Across from the bar, a man reclined on an ornate leather couch. His feet were propped up on a table. Ice cubes, swimming in brown liquor, filled the tumbler in his hand. Age seemed lost on him, though he must have been somewhere between forty-five and sixty. Turning over a hardbound volume, he dropped his feet to the floor and stood with a certain ease.

"Welcome, my friend. Would you like a drink?" He waved toward the bar.

"Is it done?" Rex asked.

The man tisked. "Always straight to business with you. Yes, it is finished. Alarawn Industries has already been sold to the highest bidder. The paperwork was signed this morning, and you should receive payment in your account by the end of business tomorrow. Although I have to say it wasn't easy. Paperwork alone was a nightmare, what with the board chopped to hell. Or should I say murdered at the hands of 'corporate terrorists.' At least the papers are buying that lie. But why the hell did everything get so out of hand?"

Rex laughed. "Out of hand? Everything went precisely as expected."

"Really?" the man asked, behind raised eyebrows.

"Of course," Rex replied. "Why do you think I convinced Alarawn to hire the historian? Who do you think gave Brooke the suggestion to

use the serum on herself? Do you think all of this could have happened by chance?"

The ageless man joined Rex's laughter.

"Well, then. Sit down. Tell me more about your masterful orchestration."

Rex's laughter ceased. "After you." He spread his hand out toward the seat in deference.

The man dropped onto the couch.

In one practiced move, Rex reached into his jacket and drew a Sig Pro. He sank three rounds into the chest of the man on the couch.

Rex wiped the gun, tossed it on the couch, and turned to leave the building.

Rain fell hard on his shoulders as he walked out onto the streets of the Steel City.

TO BE CONTINUED...



Friends!

Thank you so much for reading *Catalyst* (and for reading these notes). I love this book, and I'm thrilled that you decided to give it a chance.

Three years ago, I (Lee) was functionally unemployed with no clear path or vision for what I wanted to do in life. I was bored, broke, and more or less bumming each day away on my couch. Then my buddy Chris told me he had an idea for a book about adjunct professors in Pittsburgh and everything changed.

Writing with Chris filled me with the kind of energy my life had been missing for years. I'd stay up until dawn researching steel making and poetry and martial arts. Hours would disappear while I edited and re-edited drafts, trying to craft the perfect paragraph. But writing a good story takes more than enthusiasm. It takes certain skills—knowledge of story structure and character development and prose—skills I severely lacked at the time. The result of all that blind passion was *The Catalyst*, a book that I loved dearly, but which had some serious structural flaws.

If we had stopped there, I would have been happy. I wrote a book that I liked and had a ton of fun doing it. But we didn't stop. We kept writing AND we kept learning. Some just the two of us, a few with a team of writers. We kept Chem and Willa and Elijah in the back of our minds, waiting for us to try again.

Twenty books later (you can find them below these notes), Chris and I decided we couldn't put our first characters off any longer. They were a part of us, and we had to give them their due. We pulled the Steel City Heroes from publication, tore the books apart, and spent

months rewriting and reworking them, refining what we loved about the originals, while reanimating them with what we've learned since about writing good stories.

And like Elijah Branton emerging from the cauldron, *Catalyst* was reborn. And I couldn't be happier.

So, thank you thank you thank you for reading this book that was three years in the making. If you liked it, I'd love to hear your thoughts (and an Amazon review wouldn't hurt either, hint, hint). If you're anxious to know what happens next for our plucky academics, don't worry. The next three books are already written and will be released over the next two months. (In fact, depending on when you get to these notes, they're probably already out).

[Sign up for our newsletter](#) so you don't miss it and tell your friends to do the same. AND, if you keep turning, you can read the opening chapters of *Corrosion*, Steel City Heroes Book 2.

See you in the Steel City,
Lee



The Steel City Heroes saga is just beginning! Continue the story with [Corrosion](#), book 2 of the series. (ASIN: B07QRVP5PX)

[Sign up](#) for Chris and Lee's newsletter for updates, new releases, and promotions. When you join the community, you'll get a FREE copy of their fast, fun thriller, *The Devil's Due*: https://www.subscribepage.com/chris_and_lee

If you liked *Catalyst*, keep reading. There's a lot more to come for Elijah, Willa, and Chem in *Corrosion*, book 2 of the Steel City Heroes saga!

You can also check out the other series by CM Raymond and LE Barbant.

The Rise of Magic is a future fantasy series that initiates an enormous and sprawling storyline that opens a world of forty books written by over ten authors. Set in The Kurtherian Gambit Universe, [The Rise of Magic](#) follows the origins of Hannah, a young woman from humble roots, who finds the magic inside of her might just be enough to fight an unjust regime that has taken over her city. If you're looking for a badass heroine with heart and snark, you'll love this series! But beware, take one step down *The Age of Magic* path, and you'll be walking for a long, long time!

Want more snarky heroines? Well, Chris and Lee also have an urban fantasy series about the mythic gods return to earth in their series with ST Branton, [Forgotten Gods](#). The tagline is: *The gods are real, and they're assholes*. And it couldn't be closer to the truth. This series is fun, fast, exciting, and a little irreverent. Vampires, werewolves, and

all manner of monstrous creatures serve the unknown powers of old, but the story centers on the humans who make the heroic choice to fight them. Join Vic and her crew as they attempt to save earth from the gods who want it back. You won't forget, Forgotten Gods.



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